

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

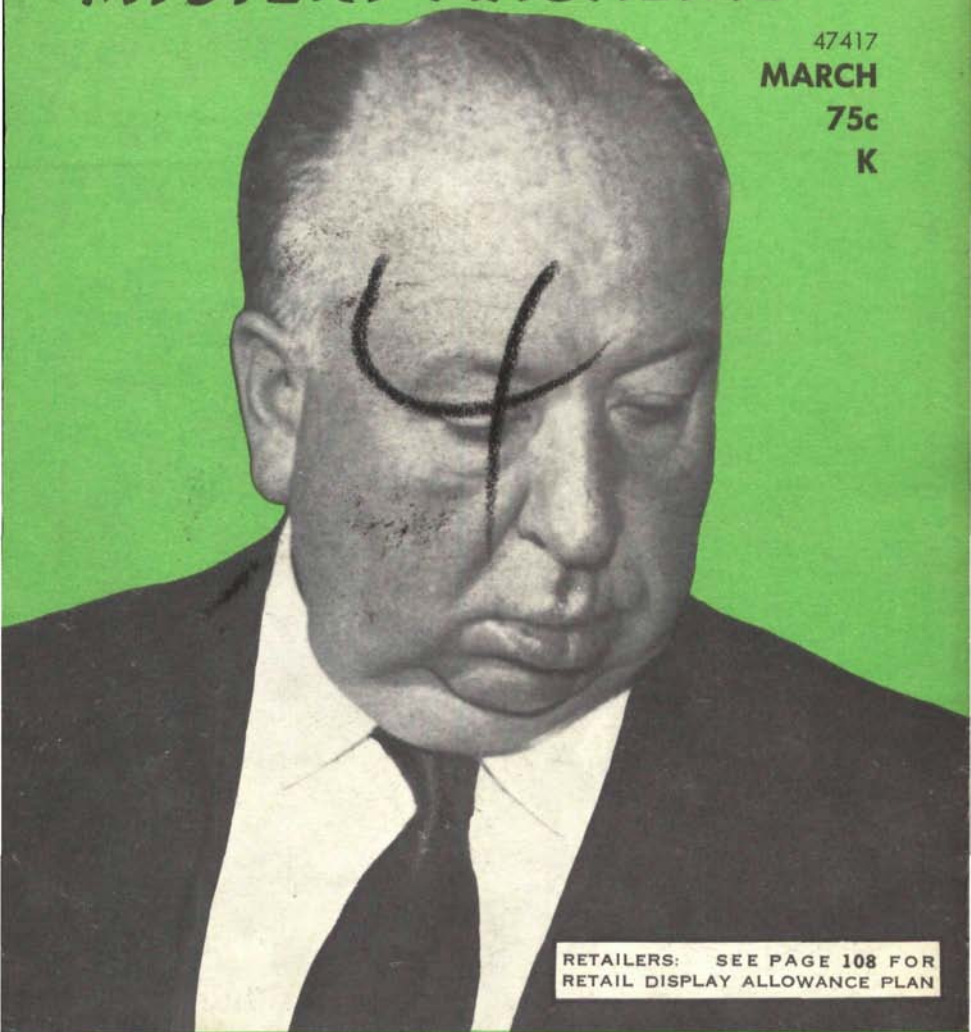
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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RETAILERS: SEE PAGE 108 FOR
RETAIL DISPLAY ALLOWANCE PLAN

NEW stories presented by the MASTER OF SUSPENSE

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March 1975



Dear Reader:

It is not in my heart to explode a popular legend, but I do have it on reliable authority that Mr. Groundhog emerges from his den only to pick up the latest issue of this magazine. His shadow or the lack of it is immaterial, for he invariably withdraws again to read in privacy. Of course, I am referring to Mr. Charles Groundhog of, coincidentally enough, Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

Having a heart, even at this time of year, is passé on these premises. It is simply not done. Oh, perhaps a tender character occasionally creeps into these pages like a Valentine vendor, but there is always something compelling about the story that demands its presence here anyway. After all, one note does not a dirge make.

However, do not search for much sentiment in *Blue Devil* by Albert Avellano, or in very many that follow, to the Richard Deming novelette about Detective Sergeant Sod Harris titled *Maggie's Grip*. I am heartless in my dedication to suspense.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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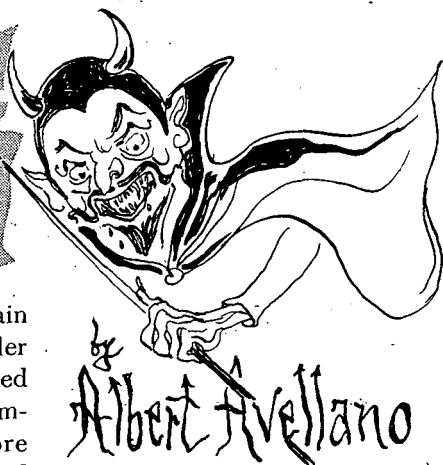
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 3, March 1975. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions where \$10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408. Copyright H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 1975. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

This may not be the typical way to ruin one's day, but it will certainly suffice.

Blue Devil



If the owner of the feed and grain store hadn't seen Roy Spangler drive up, he wouldn't have looked at him twice. As it was, he examined him carefully. Roy wore faded denims and an equally faded and sweat-stained red T-shirt. His thick-soled work boots were worn and scuffed. He was about 30, give or take five years; stood five-foot-ten, give or take an inch; and, despite narrow hips, weighed somewhere around one-seventy, mostly because of his meaty shoulders. His face was covered with about two weeks' growth of black stubble, making him look more like a derelict than a paying customer.

The car made the difference. It was a high-powered foreign sports

car. The store owner didn't know what type, but he knew it was expensive. He would have been willing to bet it had cost upwards of \$20,000. Even with a thin film of road dust over it, the metallic blue had so much depth he felt he could sink his arm into it up to the elbow.

Spangler was surely the owner. From the spot where the store owner sat in front of the store, he had a good view of the mountain road until it made its first turn a mile away. He'd watched the

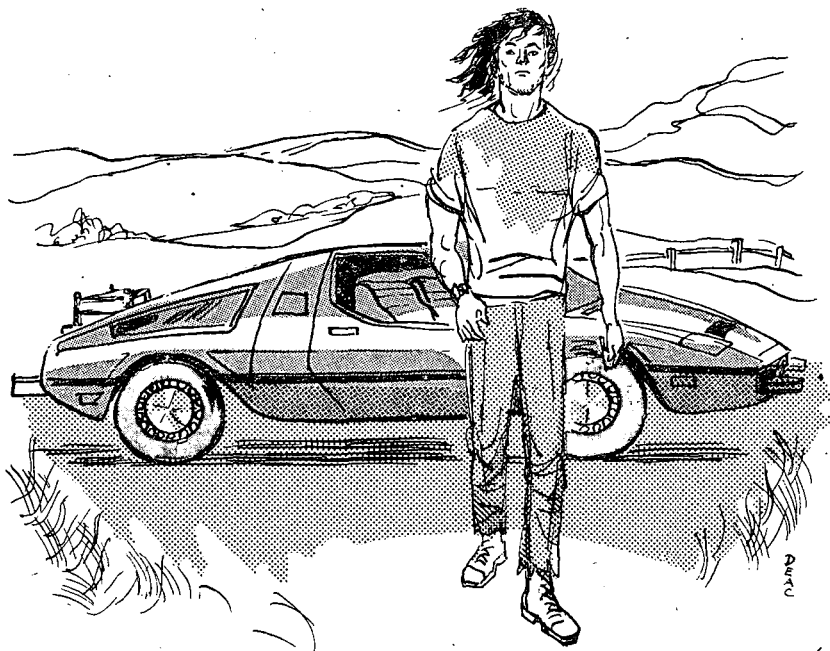
little car come dancing down the road like a blue spark on a pine log. The way Spangler had geared down to make the turn onto the store's parking area, and hadn't skidded so much as an inch, showed he knew how to control the car with precision and how to get the most from it. When he had climbed out and walked around to approach the store entrance, his hand brushed lightly, possessively over the car's body. It was his car, all right, and that made him a man of means.

Instead of ignoring him and let-

ting the clerk inside take care of him, the store owner got to his feet, smiled and extended his hand. "Hi! I'm Clyde Gibbler. What can I do for ya?"

Spangler shook hands briefly, then took a small notebook from one of his hip pockets. He tore off a page and handed it to Gibbler. "Can you fill this order?" he asked.

Gibbler ran a blunt finger down the list. "Yeah, all but the fertilizer. I've got everythin' else in stock. Gonna plant a little garden?"



"Yes. I'm building a small place in the hills—" he gestured vaguely back in the direction from which he had come "—and I thought I'd see if I can coax anything out of the ground." He showed his disappointment with a frown, and the furrowed brow, coupled with his soft voice, made him seem older than he had at first.

Gibbler added five years to his original estimate, raising the upper age limit to forty. He thought Spangler seemed too mature and settled for the car he drove. A wild sports car like that suggested a degree of hell-raising capability that Gibbler couldn't detect anywhere else. Spangler's pale-blue eyes were sober and steady. He looked at the store owner when he spoke; otherwise, he seemed to focus on some distant and tranquil scene.

"When will you have the fertilizer?"

"If ya don't mind waitin' a half hour or so, I expect a delivery of some 40% ammonium nitrate later this afternoon," Gibbler told him.

Spangler seemed to consider. He looked at his wristwatch, then glanced across the road to a truck stop. "Okay. That'll be better than having to make two trips." He took his car keys from his pocket and handed them to Gibbler. "Load everything into my car. I'll

wait over there at the truck stop."

"Sure thing, mister. If you watch through the window, you'll see when the delivery truck gets here."

Spangler turned and walked toward the highway with an easy, unhurried stride.

From his position behind the counter in the Truck Stop Cafe, the young counterman had seen the blue car arrive at the feed and grain store as he leaned on the counter and stared out the window. Business was always slow at this time of the day. The last couple of hours before sundown, truckers tried to push for a few more miles while they still had daylight. They seldom picked this time to stop for food or fuel unless the need was great.

There were two men in the cafe, sitting at one of the tables near the front window, but they wouldn't have been there if they'd had a choice. The Cade brothers were independent truckers who were suffering from a plague of bad luck. First their rig had broken an axle, then the cooling unit on the trailer had gone out. Parts for both were on the way, but there wasn't much hope that they'd arrive in time to save the load of strawberries that was baking in the sun outside. Both men

had been sneaking drinks from a hidden bottle to take their minds off their troubles; but every time one of them turned his red-rimmed eyes toward their crippled rig, he shook with impotent rage.

The counterman watched Spangler saunter to the road, pause while half a dozen cars and a truck passed, then walk across. The cafe, like the fuel pumps, was set back about 150 feet from the highway so there would be plenty of room to park the big rigs. When Spangler was about halfway between the highway and the cafe, he stopped and turned slowly in the direction of the Cade brothers' rig. That's when the smell of the cooking strawberries reached him, the counterman figured, and that was a bad sign. The odor was getting stronger.

Spangler continued walking, entered the cafe and took a seat at the counter. "Coffee," he said quietly. "And do you have strawberry shortcake?"

The counterman winced and glanced quickly at the Cade brothers. They had scraped their chairs back and were lurching to their feet. "That ain't funny!" one of them roared, and they both moved up behind Spangler.

Spangler gave the counterman a

questioning look, but didn't swing around to face them.

The counterman aimed his right index finger at the brothers like a pistol. "Don't you two start anythin'. This fella didn't mean nothin'."

"What d'ya mean he didn't mean nothin'? You heard him. He thinks he's real smart." The speaker reached out a hand and spun Spangler around on the stool.

The counterman vaulted the counter, stopping the action before anything more serious could happen. "You don't hear too good," he said, pushing between the brothers and Spangler. "I just told ya he didn't mean nothin'. Now go back and sit down. Either that, or go out and wait in your rig. You try to start anythin' here an' I'll call the sheriff."

"It ain't us who started it," one protested, glaring at Spangler, but the bluster was gone. They turned and went back to their table.

The counterman walked back behind the counter and Spangler swung around on the stool.

"Sorry about that," the counterman said in answer to Spangler's unasked question. "Those fellas have a load of strawberries rotting outside and they're kinda touchy about it."

Spangler nodded. "I can under-

stand that," he said. He had two cups of coffee and a piece of apple pie, and forty-five minutes later he paid his check and left.

As soon as Spangler was outside and walking toward the store on the other side of the highway, the Cade brothers approached the counterman. "How come ya sided with that stranger?" they wanted to know. "We been good customers of yours for a long time. It ain't right for you to side with strangers."

"I wasn't sidin' with the stranger, I was lookin' out for you guys."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Did ya see his tattoo?"

"Tattoo?"

"Yeah. He had a tattoo of a little blue devil on his forearm, just above the dial of his wristwatch."

"So what?"

"When I was in the Army, I was sent to Fort Benning for advanced infantry training. The cadre there were some of the roughest guys you could ever meet. They'd seen duty in Korea, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and some places no one ever heard of before."

"You mean that guy who was in here was one o' them? You recognized him?"

"Not exactly. I never saw him

before, but I've seen that tattoo. Like I said, the instructors were a rough bunch. They had their own private club with an initiation only the toughest could pass. A new man assigned to the training staff would be tossed on a plane, taken a thousand miles, stripped down to his skin, and left out in the countryside somewhere. He had from Friday night till Monday morning to get back to Benning."

"That doesn't sound so hard."

"It was, though. He couldn't ask anyone for help. If he got back to his barracks without being seen by anyone, he earned the little blue devil tattoo. If not, he never got a second chance."

"Were there many instructors with the tattoo?"

"I knew two of them. They were both experts at survival."

The brothers turned and looked thoughtfully through the window in the direction Spangler had gone.

Spangler entered the feed and grain store, paid his bill and picked up his car keys. The merchant said, "Your seed and the cans of fuel oil are in the trunk. We tied the sacks of fertilizer to the luggage rack on the rear deck."

"That's fine. Thanks," Spangler said. He went out to the sports

car and checked the ropes that were holding the four hundred-pound sacks of fertilizer in place. They seemed secure enough, so he got behind the wheel and pulled away.

He could feel the difference made by the additional weight. The car's center of gravity had shifted rearward, changing the steering characteristics. He drove cautiously for the first few miles until he had adjusted to the new handling, then he picked up speed until the speedometer needle hovered on 90 mph. If he hurried he might be able to get back to his cabin before dark. The added weight in and on the car's trunk had probably had an adverse effect on the headlight adjustment. Even with load-levelers, the front end had probably been lifted slightly. In the interest of safety, night driving should be avoided.

Spangler was down-shifting as he drove through an S-curve when he saw the hitchhiker on the other side of the road. Spangler was too busy driving to notice much, but he did register the impression of a slightly built, long-haired figure, wearing fringed buckskins and carrying a knapsack, trudging along the opposite road shoulder. He might not have seen even that if it hadn't been such a stupid place for a man to be walking

along the road. No one was going to stop in the middle of the S-curve to pick him up, and soon darkness would make the spot dangerous. The sun was low in the sky behind him, and when the road dipped in spots it was already dark enough in the shallow depressions for cars to use their headlights.

Suddenly, a gray highway department truck appeared on the road ahead, bearing down on him rapidly. It had a stake body covered by sheets of tarpaulin. The driver was hogging the center of the road, straddling the white line. Spangler pulled as far to the right as he could, but it wasn't quite enough. There was almost no road shoulder and at that point the roadbed had been blasted out of rock, with a three-foot wall of stone on both sides. There was plenty of room for two lanes of traffic except when, as now, a driver tried to take his half out of the middle.

Spangler pumped his brakes and geared down rapidly to use the engine drag to help slow the sports car. The truck swerved slightly to avoid a head-on collision and shot past with its canvas sides flapping wildly in the slipstream. As the truck's heavy rear bumper passed the back of Spangler's car, it made contact with his

rear bumper, yanking the little car around and slamming it against the shelf of rock.

The setting sun had shone directly into the cab of the truck as it passed. Spangler saw three men in the cab and one of them had been holding a bottle to his lips. That figured.

Angrily, he cut his wheels sharply to the left, dropped back into second gear because he was still rolling slowly, floored the accelerator, driving the rpm's to the red line, then popped the clutch to spin his rear wheels and break their traction with the road. The back end swung around and the sports car was in the other lane in time to see the truck disappear around a bend a quarter of a mile away.

Spangler didn't know how much damage had been done to his car, but he knew it hadn't gone unmarked. The way it had been slammed against the ledge of rock, there was probably excessive body damage, if nothing else. His better judgment told him he should stop and examine the car before trying to drive it at high speed; but he knew that if he stopped for too long he might not be able to catch up with the highway department truck. Right then, his desire to get his hands on the driver of the truck outweighed all

other considerations on his mind.

He ran through the gears more quickly than he ever had at a drag strip and entered the S-curve doing 95 mph and accelerating. The truck was only seconds ahead of him and he fully expected to see it again at any moment.

He went into the first turn and hit the apex perfectly, then straightened out, geared back up into fourth, and bore down on the second curve. He dropped back into third, then, at the last moment, he swung wide, hitting the brakes and spinning out.

The little hitchhiker he had spotted earlier was lying in the road, directly in the path he would have had to follow to negotiate the curve at high speed. Spangler narrowly missed going off the road and into the trees and heavy underbrush, but he steered into the skid and got the car under control. As soon as he had the car slowed sufficiently, he twisted the steering wheel and raced back to the still form in the road. He jumped out and ran to it, leaving the car door hanging open.

He had assumed the hitchhiker had been hit by the truck, but when he got closer he saw that wasn't the case. The form was lying peacefully, like a passed-out drunk, not torn and mangled as it would have been had a speeding

truck struck even a glancing blow. Spangler knelt, slipped the knapsack from the man's shoulders, and rolled him onto his back. That's when he discovered the hitchhiker was a girl.

She had long brown hair framing her pale face, and she wore no makeup; however, at this close range nothing would have concealed her femininity. There was a gash above her left ear and blood had matted the hair around it. Pieces of brown glass in the road told the story: as the highway department truck had reached this point, the man who had been drinking had finished the bottle and hurled it out the window at the hitchhiker, probably not really expecting to hit her. It was the kind of thing a drunk might think was funny.

Spangler pressed his thumbs along the edge of the wound. Her skull seemed to be intact and the bleeding was stopping, but she could just as easily have been dead. As it was, there was no telling how seriously she was hurt until she regained consciousness, or he took her to a hospital.

Spangler scooped the girl up and carried her to the sports car. He strapped her in with both the seat belt and the shoulder harness, and dropped her knapsack on the floor at her feet. Hardly a minute

after he had stopped, he was speeding down the road again in pursuit of the gray truck. The curves and dips were more gradual along this stretch, so he was able to open the car up.

For the next few minutes he gave himself entirely to his driving, concentrating on the car and propelling it as quickly as possible over the ribbon of road that was unwinding in front of him. Then he reached a straight stretch that extended for five miles. He looked for the truck and it wasn't ahead of him.

The road was empty.

This didn't make sense. There had been no side roads, and the truck couldn't be so far ahead that it was out of sight.

Yet it *was* out of sight.

Spangler slowed and pulled over to the side of the road. He didn't have to be Dick Tracy to figure this one out. If the truck wasn't ahead of him, and it wasn't, then he must have passed it. It must have turned off somewhere along the way and he had been going too fast to notice any telltale signs on the road shoulder.

His first impulse was to retrace his route immediately and find the spot where the truck had turned off. He didn't want the driver to get away that easily, but he had to consider the girl. She might

need emergency care. He turned on the instrument panel light and found she was fully conscious and staring at him. She seemed to be about twenty. In other clothes, he was sure, she would have been very attractive.

"You feel okay?" he asked.

"Lousy. My head's splitting. What'd you do—run me over?" It wasn't an accusation. She was looking for information.

"No. Someone threw a bottle and you caught it over your left ear."

She reached up to touch the spot and winced. "Why did you stop? You were going like a bat, then pulled over."

He explained about the chase and how the truck must have pulled off the road.

"Well, let's go back and find it. I want to give those guys a piece of my mind!" she said.

Spangler examined her eyes. They looked all right. There didn't seem to be any indication of a concussion. Her skin coloring wasn't as pasty pale as it had been, either. She was a lot tougher than he had expected a girl her size to be. There didn't seem to be any reason to go rushing off to a hospital, so they might as well try to track down the highway department truck.

He turned around and kept his

speed at 40 mph. He turned on his headlights and drove in the center of the road as the truck had been doing. This way the lights threw almost equal illumination on both sides of the highway.

"Look for tire tracks on the shoulder or crushed grass and underbrush," he told her. "I'll do the same on this side."

It was the girl who found the spot where the truck had turned off. "Over here!" she called, indicating a place where the foliage was especially heavy. Spangler pointed his headlights at it and could see where heavy tires had pulled across the shoulder. About ten feet from the road, a pair of 50-gallon drums were sitting, and the trail led between them. Once he knew where to look, the scene was easy to read. There was a path leading into the underbrush, marked by the two seemingly abandoned steel drums, and the truck had steered between them.

Spangler nosed the sports car between the steel drums and stopped. The trail was well-worn, the product of much traffic. Tire tracks led down a slope to the left. Between them, the tall grass was streaked with dirty oil and grease from where it had wiped the undersides of passing vehicles. Clearly, this wasn't a one-time maneuver the truck driver had

made to throw off pursuit. He might not even have realized he was being followed.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" the girl asked. "Let's see where it goes."

Spangler eased the car forward and began to follow the twists and turns of the hidden trail. Dense underbrush pressed in on both sides, and there were places where tree branches blocked the sky. The rays of the setting sun still touched the treetops, but it was already dark along the trail, and the farther they went, the blacker it became.

The trail was leading downward. At times Spangler had to touch the brake pedal to slow the car's forward motion. He didn't know what to expect and wanted to approach whatever lay ahead at a controlled pace. The weight of the fertilizer on the trunk was a blessing. With the car's nose pointed down, the headlights would normally have given only a very limited view of the path ahead. As it was, because the front end was lifted slightly, the lights had greater range than they would have had otherwise.

The sports car came to a shallow stream and Spangler considered turning back. As the car inched across it, he could hear the sound of rocks grating against the

frame and differential. The little car didn't ride as high above the ground as the highway department truck; therefore, the hidden trail contained hazards that wouldn't concern the truck driver at all.

Spangler couldn't imagine what kind of project the highway department was engaged in so far from the road. After traveling a mile, he seemed no closer to the end of the trail than before. He would have turned around, but there was no place to do it. On one side there was a 30-foot drop and on the other a weed-covered embankment. Then, a short while later, the trail became even more steep, made a sharp twist to the left, and the sports car emerged at the edge of a small clearing.

Two tents had been set up 150 yards away, and a jeep painted in highway-department gray was parked in front of one of them. The truck they had been following stood at the entrance to the other. A gasoline generator could be heard chugging in the distance, and flickering bare light bulbs hung from the tents, illuminating the area.

Half a dozen men were collected at the rear of the truck. The lights of the sports car swept over them just as Spangler brought it to a halt. The men

turned toward the car, stood frozen for a second, then became very busy at the mouth of the tent. One man separated from the others and moved to the right with a long tube on his shoulder.

Spangler didn't have to be told what that was. He'd seen a bazooka before. By the time the man had dropped to his knee and was aiming the weapon, Spangler had shot the car forward and had it leaning into the tightest turn he'd ever attempted. One thing he knew—getting hit by a bazooka rocket wasn't habit-forming. Once would be too much.

When he saw the flash at the rear of the launcher, Spangler stood on his brake pedal, hoping he was guessing right. He was. The gunner had been aiming ahead of the car, sending the rocket for the point where the car would have been had it continued at the same speed. The rocket, a dull-black projectile, passed through the headlight glare and struck the trunk of a tall tree 30 yards away. There was a red and yellow flash and toothpick-size splinters filled the air. The sports car shot out of the clearing just as the tree came crashing down to block the hidden trail.

There was the whine of bullets whipping past his open window, followed by the reports of rifles.

"They—they're trying to kill us!" the girl exclaimed.

Spangler knew the only thing she wanted to hear was a denial, so he didn't say anything. That's when the warning light flashed on the instrument panel and he discovered he had no oil pressure. He remembered the grating sound when he had crossed the stream and figured he must have holed the oil pan. His oil had poured out onto the trail and had taken one of his options with it—the option to run. He stopped and killed his lights.

"What are you stopping for? They'll be after us, won't they?"

Spangler drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "Yes," he answered. "But we need more time." He reached into the map pocket on his door and pulled out a flashlight. Then he opened the door and stepped out.

The girl unfastened the seat belt and shoulder harness she'd been wearing since he put her in the car and moved to join him.

"No," Spangler said. "Stay here. I won't be gone long."

"Where are you going?"

"To buy us some time," he said.

Spangler trotted back along the trail toward the clearing. He held his hand over the flashlight's lens so that he could control the beam by opening or closing his fingers.

When he got close enough to the clearing to hear excited voices, he turned off the light.

He stood at the point where the trail dropped steeply before twisting to the left and ending at the clearing. He could hear the men below him, swearing and rattling a chain. He figured they had been cutting branches so they could attach a chain to the trunk of the fallen tree. Once they pulled it out of the way, they'd be pouring out of that clearing like garbage from an unplugged sewer.

Then what? He squatted down to listen and decide on his course of action.

Someone, obviously the leader of the group, was rebuking a man called Ritchie. "Ritchie, you're too much! You've been practicing with that bazooka for three weeks, an' the first time you have to use it you miss by a mile."

"How wuz I t'know he'd stop? I did ever'thing just like the book said. 'Sides, I'd had a few drinks in town." There was a whine in his voice.

"That's another thing—you idiots were told to pick up supplies and lay off the booze. Instead, you came coasting in here smelling like distilleries. I don't know what you did to attract attention to yourselves an' get that sports car to follow you, but it's

cost us the armored car. If we can't make people think we're a highway department work crew, and stay out of sight before the robbery, there's no way we can expect t'do it afterwards when half the cops in the country will be looking for us."

"Ain't there some way we can still pull it off?" one of them wanted to know.

"Only if we're lucky. If that sports car reaches the road, we can kiss the armored car robbery good-bye. But it was mighty low-slung, and the trail isn't easy to travel at night. If it gets hung up somewhere, or the driver misses a turn or piles it up some other way, we may be able to catch it."

The sounds of activity became more frantic. Spangler allowed his fingers to part a fraction of an inch and swept the area around him with a sliver of light. He located half a dozen boulders of various sizes, then turned off the light and quickly collected the boulders in a pile at the point where the trail made its final sharp, twisting descent to the clearing.

Finally, he heard the sound of the truck being moved into position, the rattle of chain again, and the fallen tree was dragged aside. Spangler stooped and picked up the largest boulder, hugged it to

his chest and stood up, then did a military press, hoisting it high over his head. As soon as the path was clear, the jeep nosed onto the trail and started up the steep incline.

Spangler stood high above it and to one side, well out of the glare of its bouncing headlights. When there was no possible chance of missing, he heaved the heavy stone through the windshield directly in front of the driver.

The jeep bucked crazily, then stalled with its front end half off the trail and its headlights pointing into dense foliage. Someone howled in pain and panic, and Spangler dropped a pair of 50-pound boulders onto the canvas top, tearing it from its supports. The scream became a whimper and stopped abruptly. He followed these with two more, slightly smaller rocks just to be sure he'd done all the damage he could, then ran slipping and sliding down the slope to the side of the disabled vehicle.

He yanked open the door and shined his light inside. The driver sat with the huge boulder in his lap. His head dangled to one side and blood dripped from his open mouth. The only other occupant sat beside the driver. He had been holding a rifle between his legs

with its stock on the floor. One of the 50-pound rocks had struck him between his hunched shoulder blades, driving him forward and imbedding the rifle barrel into the center of his chest. A pair of hand grenades hung from his belt.

Spangler transferred the grenades to his own belt and snatched the key from the ignition. The rifle was covered with gore and probably bent, besides, so he left it where it was. He tossed the key into the underbrush and pushed his way through the vegetation to where he could lift the hood. He twisted off the distributor cap and tore it loose along with several wires. It followed the key into the thick foliage just as he heard the rumble of the truck. He knew the others had unhooked the tree and were coming to follow the jeep.

He turned and ran up the trail as fast as he could. He didn't use his light until he turned the first bend and then he kept it shielded with his hand. By the time he got back to the sports car, he was breathing heavily. It had been an uphill climb all the way.

The girl was standing beside the car. He told her what he'd overheard and what he'd done. Then he said, "Give me a hand. We have to work fast."

He untied the rope that was se-

curing the sacks of fertilizer to the trunk-lid carrier. He handed the rope to the girl, telling her to unravel it and make one long length of twine from the individual strands. While she got busy with that, he tore a corner from each of the four plastic fertilizer sacks. Next he removed a five-gallon fuel oil container from the trunk and poured about a gallon of fuel oil into each sack.

"What're you doing?" the girl asked.

"Getting a surprise ready for those guys in the truck. I'm going to ruin their day," he said, using the understatement he'd picked up in the Army.

He tossed the fuel oil container into the underbrush and brought out a couple of one-quart cans of oil that had been in the trunk. He set them beside one of the front tires while he crawled under the car. As he expected, there was a gash in the oil pan. He made a temporary repair by wedging a piece of his T-shirt into the opening and pounding it tightly in place with a screwdriver and a rock. Then he raised the hood and poured the oil into the filler opening.

"That's not as much as the engine needs," he told the girl, "so I'm going to have to drive slowly."

The fertilizer sacks were the next problem. Even if the rope had still been intact and strong enough to hold them, it would be at least an hour before the fuel oil was absorbed properly. They couldn't be placed on their sides or their contents would pour out the openings he'd made.

He returned to the trunk and proceeded to clean it out. He threw most of that afternoon's purchases and his spare tire alongside the trail. The only thing he retained was his tool chest and his new shovel. He set the sacks inside, positioning them so they couldn't fall over, and closed the lid.

He drove slowly, stopping often to crawl under the car and inspect the plug in the oil pan. It remained in place. When he got to the point where the trail had a steep drop on one side and a tall embankment on the other, he stopped again. He used the shovel to dig two deep holes, one in each tire track, and concealed them with twigs and brush.

Once the men got the jeep out of their way, he knew the truck would be coming. When it got this far, one or both of its front wheels would drop into the trenches. He figured it would take a lot more time and effort to free the truck than it had taken to set

the trap—and it would give him more time.

As it turned out, Spangler hadn't finished the holes any too soon. He'd no more than settled himself behind the wheel of the sports car again when he heard the rumble of the truck and saw the glow of its approaching lights. He got away from there and didn't stop again until he reached the road.

Here he unloaded the fertilizer sacks, dropping two into each of the 50-gallon steel drums that marked the entrance to the hidden trail. He pulled the safety pin from one of the grenades, being careful to hold the release handle down while he did it, and straightened the pin with his teeth. Then he replaced the pin. The next time it was pulled, far less force would be needed to remove it.

He repeated the procedure with the second grenade, then attached the end of the twine to its pin and set it inside the nearest of the steel drums. He ran the twine to the other drum, fastened it to the

pin of the remaining grenade, and walked back along the hidden trail, playing out the length of twine. He made a half-turn around a small tree, crossed the trail and tied the end securely to another tree.

"Another trap?" the girl asked.

"Uh-huh. I've turned the fertilizer into a pretty powerful explosive, but it'll take a good jolt to set it off. When the truck comes it'll hit the twine, pulling the pins from the grenades, then keep right on coming. It'll be next to the drums when they blow."

They went back to the sports car and Spangler drove slowly away with the girl beside him.

"What about the police?" she asked.

"What about them?"

"Aren't you going to call them?"

"I don't need the police," he said.

She seemed to consider that for a moment. "No," she conceded. "I guess you don't." Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "My name's Marie."



There are morgues, and then there are other morgues—which preclude the probability of “half an obit.”

The Death Desk



I've been bouncing around the newspaper trade for almost thirty years—layman in Buffalo, police beat in Chicago, wire editor in Baton Rouge. I've been in a lot of city rooms and must have filed five tons of copy but, like all reporters, I have one yarn that has never seen the light of print. Some reporters will tell you they didn't print a certain story because they couldn't prove it, even though they knew it to be true. In my case, it wasn't just a lack of proof; I couldn't even figure the damn thing out. Now that I have, it's too late to do anything about it. Even if I could, I wouldn't.

I didn't have to go far to observe the whole thing, because it happened right under my nose in

the city room of the *Frankport Post-Union*, up in New England back in the early '30s.

The *Post-Union* was a morning and evening paper with separate editorial staffs for each edition. I worked the night shift on the rewrite desk; which wasn't bad when you considered that Ted McCoy, the managing editor, worked on the day side. Of course the day crew had a large circula-

tion and got all the prestige, but I was too old a newshand to put up with McCoy's testy ways and daily tantrums; but try to explain that to young Bobby Hawks.

Poor Bobby had been slaving on the night obit desk for almost fourteen months and hadn't moved a quad's width toward advancement. Now, all young fellows starting out usually are assigned to write obituaries. It's good training in using the five W's properly and learning the paper's stylebook. However, fourteen months on obits was unheard of—it was cruel and inhuman punishment.

The kid brought it on himself, though. Bobby's problem was not seeded in incompetence; contrarily, he was the best obit man the *Post-Union* had ever had. His career had been crippled by his own enthusiasm and deferred by his initiative. He was imprisoned, seemingly forever, in a job he performed too willingly, too well.

Even the location of the obit desk, tucked away in a far corner of the city room, symbolized Bobby's isolation from the other men who handled hard, front-page news. In the cynical and sarcastic minds of the night crew, Bobby was a joke. While the rest of us worked from 6 p.m. through 2 a.m., McCoy had assigned Bobby

to the "trick shift." All of us knew the "trick" was to stay awake from four in the afternoon till four the next morning. It made little sense to keep the kid there for two hours after the morning paper had been put to bed. Even if a late story came in, Bobby couldn't do much about it anyway, except leave it for the daymen when they came in at seven to work up the afternoon editions.

"You know what that kid's trouble is?" Cal Slocum, a sports-writer, asked one night when we were drinking our dinner break in a "speak" about two blocks from the paper. "He's too naive."

"I don't know, Cal," I said. "I know what you mean—the conscientious thing—but there's something about that young guy that's, well, foreboding. I covered an execution once in Louisiana and the guy had the same kind of ice-blue eyes, the same intentness on the task at hand."

"Look of the doomed, huh?"

"No, I wasn't talking about the prisoner, I meant the hangman. Same kind of eyes."

"Probably gets that way from all the undertakers he talks to. You know they send him Christmas presents?"

"Why not, Cal? For the first time in ten years the obits come out with the right ages and ad-

dresses—a definite improvement.”

“Sure, but McCoy knows that, too. The kid’s stuck.”

Well, if he was stuck, he was making the most of it. A few weeks later, I learned that Bobby had written several articles for a funeral directors’ trade journal. I managed to get hold of one and was surprised to learn that he could write rather well. The subject, “The Obituary, Your Best Public Relations Tool,” was a little bizarre, but showed crafty inventiveness. I know now just how inventive Bobby really had been.

I decided to play Dutch uncle when Fred Norris, the night editor, came down sick and took a leave of absence. I took over the night slot in the interim, but that didn’t allow me to elevate Bobby to straight news. I didn’t want McCoy on my neck. I did have a talk with Bobby, however.

“You ought to quit, Bobby,” I told him on my way home one night. “Not right away, but make some plans. I know several people who have their own slots on papers around the country. I’ll write them and see if they have any openings.”

“Thanks just the same, Mr. Bowers, but I’ve got to make it here. I grew up in this town, I grew up reading this paper. I

think it can be better. Thanks anyway, I’ll remember this.” He looked up from his typewriter, those cold blue eyes staring off somewhere else as if planning a dream.

Three days later, I came in to work to find a message waiting from Ted McCoy. I reported to his office a little tremulous and a bit excited. I was thinking that maybe Fred Norris had died and I was getting his job. I should have checked with Bobby. Although Fred wasn’t exactly kicking, he was alive, and McCoy was in a rage.

“Did you print this?” he snorted, tossing the morning edition’s obituary page onto the desk in front of me. I read it quickly:

MRS. JAMES BERNOIT

Mrs. Mary Bernoit, 70, wife of James Bernoit of 215 Spring Street, died last night in St. Helena’s Hospital. She had been a patient there since March 10. Funeral services will be announced.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Bobby had not let me down. The style and form were correct. “Yes, I edited this.”

“Then where the devil is the rest of it; survivors, affiliations? It’s half an obit.”

“Well, that’s all Hawks could get from the hospital.”

"The hospital! Didn't he get this from an undertaker?"

"No, sir. You see, Hawks had an idea that we shouldn't wait for an undertaker to give us information. He just calls the hospitals and picks up the latest deaths."

The smile on McCoy's face eased my tension, and for a moment I had a glimpse of hope for Bobby.

"Now that's what I call running an obit desk." McCoy was beaming. "Tell that kid he's doing a great job."

"Well, Mr. McCoy, since you brought it up, don't you think a bit of reward is in order? Maybe I can start breaking him in on the county desk. You know, he really can write."

The grin and the beam went behind a cloud of rumbling anger. "Are you nuts? Are you out of your ever-lovin' mind? I finally have someone on that desk who does a good job, and you want to take him off. For ten years, I've had phone calls from irate families because we'd left out the fact that some joker was a Mason or an Elk or a Grand Exhausted Rooster. I used to get mail canceling subscriptions, but I don't get them anymore, and that's the way it's going to stay. I swear the only thing some people read in this town are the obits."

Well, that was the end of that, and I urged Bobby again to take my offer of looking around for him. He refused.

We started to slip into early winter and with it, the specter of influenza. Bobby was busy from the moment he set foot in the city room until I put the paper to bed. During that time, he had published another article for an undertakers' trade journal, "The Chig Beetle, Nature's Undertaker." It would never be confused with dynamic journalism, but it did show an ability to make a story out of nothing—absolutely nothing.

In a sense, this seemed to be Bobby's long suit. He could work within rigid confinements and still succeed. I have always admired people who can whip something up out of the materials at hand, like an inventive short-order cook. The only problem was that short-order cooks never become great chefs, nor do hack writers become great editors, even if they do sign their work "R. Southgate Hawks."

By midwinter, I thought I noticed a change in Bobby. At first, I analyzed it as occupational ennui, because he spoke very little and went about his business mechanically. Yet it was more than psychological.

"It's his stupid getup," Cal Slo-

cum said, laughing at my lack of observation. "You're so busy you haven't noticed it. The dark suit, the black tie and piped vest. Do you know he wears a homburg on the street?"

"So the kid's conservative."

"The boob is dressing like a mortician, and he gives me the creeps. Have you talked to him lately? He gives you this low, soft monotone, like he's very sorry for everything. You ought to have a talk with him before McCoy gets a gander at him."

I never got the chance. At ten o'clock the next morning, I was roused from sleep by McCoy's telephone snarl. "Get down here . . ." Click. I got down there.

Ted McCoy was more confused than angry when he handed me the typed copy:

CHARLES DONOVAN

Charles Donovan, 67, of 75 Cottonwood Road, a retired railway clerk, died at 8:15 this morning in St. Luke's Hospital after a long illness. He is survived by his wife, the former Mary Herrig, and a son, George. Funeral arrangements will be announced.

"Well?" I asked him.

"Well? What do you mean 'well'? We found this in the hold-over copy box this morning. Ev-

eryone thought it missed yesterday's afternoon edition, but when a rewrite man finally got through to the hospital at 9:30, we found out that Donovan had died *this* morning—an hour and a half ago. How could Hawks write an obit at 4 a.m. about a man who didn't die until five hours later?"

I told him I didn't know and he told me to "get Hawks the hell down here." I called and he got the hell down there.

"Where did you dig up that outfit?" McCoy commented on Bobby's attire in surprise.

"I'm sorry, sir, but on my salary, it's about the best I can do."

"Looks like you're going to bury someone." He said it offhand and then caught himself. He checked his pause and picked up the Donovan announcement.

"Would you mind explaining this, Hawks? Where did you get this information?"

"From a Mr. Demos. Nick Demos, I think he said. I assumed it was the Demos Funeral Home."

"To my knowledge, Hawks, there is no Demos Funeral Home in this entire city."

"Maybe it was from the suburbs, sir. Is there anything wrong? Is the copy incorrect?"

"Oh, it's correct, all right. Charles Donovan died this morning at 8:15, hours after this copy

was written—that's what's wrong."

"I'm sorry about the error, sir. Mr. Demos said at 8:12. I took an editorial liberty and rounded it out."

"I'm not talking about a three-minute error, you idiot. I'm talking about a story written before the man died. What are you, a clairvoyant or something?"

"No, sir, at least not to my knowledge. I simply answered the phone and took down the facts. I'm pleased they were right, sir."

McCoy looked at him with confusion and then dismissed him after telling him to "take his dumb homburg off in the office."

At least three weeks had passed when McCoy again summoned Bobby and myself from slumber.

"Hawks," he said, holding up another piece of copy paper, the one Bobby had put in the "hold" box earlier that morning, "this is insane. How in the world could you have known that R. J. Riggs was going to die this afternoon and write an obit ahead of time?"

"You have every reason to be angry, Mr. McCoy. I know the guidebook is quite explicit about getting the time of death right, but Mr. Demos wasn't quite sure and it was very late. I'll watch it in the future."

"Watch it, my foot. I'll tell you something, Hawks. After the

Donovan obit, I had a reporter check with the State Licensing Bureau. There is no mortician practicing under the name of Demos. In fact, there is no Nick Demos listed in the city directory or the phone book or voter registration lists or anywhere else. What does this guy say when he calls?"

"Well, Mr. McCoy, it's hard to say. After working eleven or twelve hours a day, I get kind of fuzzy. When the phone rings, and I answer it, there isn't anyone on the line right away. There's a lot of electrical sounds, clicks and things, like a connection is being made. Then Mr. Demos comes on and says, 'I have one for you, my boy.' I'll tell you, Mr. McCoy, he has the deepest voice I've ever heard, and yet it's quite soothing. Well, then he just gives me the dope and I type it up. He doesn't say anything else, except, 'I'll be speaking with you again.'"

McCoy sent him back to work, and the next day had the phone at Bobby's desk changed to a new extension number. During the rest of the winter, Bobby placed three predeath obits in the hold box, but there were no more conferences with McCoy. The rumors spread throughout the building, and before spring not one soul would go within five feet of his

desk. Lou, the counterman at the Diamond Luncheonette, asked him to please let him send the coffee up gratis rather than drink it in the restaurant. He continued to wear his mortician's outfit, with the addition of spats and a red carnation in his lapel.

By mid-June, Bobby's isolation was tantamount to Coventry. Then it happened. McCoy didn't call us in the morning this time. He was waiting for me when I came to work.

"Get Hawks and come to my office," he said in an agitated tone that was far from anger. Ted McCoy was visibly nervous. When we showed up at his office door, he motioned us in. His face was drawn and ashen, his words thick and slippery.

"Hawks," he said, taking a paper from his pocket, "when did this come in?"

Bobby looked at the copy:

(Date to come)

THEOPOLIS MACOPOLIS

Theopolis Macopolis, 56, . . .

"I should have tossed this away, sir. It was careless of me. I know you like desks kept neat."

"Don't play games with me, Hawks. This was found on your desk this morning. What did Mr. Demos say?"

"Well, he came on and said, 'I have another one for you. His

name is Theopolis Macopolis,' and then something happened to the connection and the line went dead. I just put in 'date to come' in case he called back when I wasn't here."

"Do you know who Theopolis Macopolis is?"

"No, sir, I don't. Sounds Greek."

McCoy lowered his head solemnly. "Hawks, I am Theopolis Macopolis."

"But, sir, your name is Ted McCoy, or Theodore McCoy."

"I changed it years ago. There isn't a soul in this world, not even my wife, who knows my real name. Heaven help me, Hawks, didn't he say anything else? Mr. Demos, I mean."

"Not another word, except—"

"Except what? Look, son, you can tell me. I'm a pretty tough guy after thirty years in this business. I can take it, son."

"Well, he said, er . . . that the party was 56 years of age."

"And I'm 56. He didn't say anything about next Tuesday, did he? I'm supposed to fly to Chicago next Tuesday. No, he wouldn't do that, would he? He only tells you hours in advance, doesn't he?" He tugged his tie open and unbuttoned the neck of his shirt.

"Well, sir, Mr. McCoy, sir, I can see that this has upset you

and I'm sorry. Now, he did say he was going to call back, didn't he? Maybe he will tonight."

McCoy winced at the word "tonight."

"Now that I really think of it, Mr. McCoy, it couldn't be you."

"How do you know that, son?"

"Because if it were a person of your importance, he would have called the city desk; not me. It stands to reason that—"

McCoy gave us a weak smile.

"That's right. No, wait a minute.

There was no one here except you when the call came in. He had to talk to you, he always talks to you. Look, I don't want you here tonight. Take it off. In fact, you're starting on the day crew tomorrow morning. I need an assistant anyway, and you might as well learn from the best. Now go home and take it easy. And stop wearing those dumb clothes. Go down to the cashier now and draw an advance on your new salary. I'll call them."

Well, if Bobby's stock went up, mine went down. Fred Norris recovered and came back as night editor, so I called a few friends around the business and finally landed a Sunday feature writer's berth with a Jersey paper. I continued to follow Bobby's career via the "People and Places" column in *Printer's Ink*, and I have

to admit I envied him. In his first year under McCoy's tutelage, he became the youngest city editor in the country. Then there was the Pulitzer for "best makeup" and, two years later, "best reporting under a deadline." That was followed by the announcement that R. Southgate Hawks, on the death of Ted McCoy, had been made managing editor of the *Frankport Post-Union* and a director of its parent, the Post Communications Company.

I was telling a fellow scribe named Todd about Bobby's meteoric rise in journalism one Saturday night when we were waiting for the final page proofs to come up from Composing.

"It was a trick, plain and simple," Todd said. "He probably got McCoy's real name from his birth record. You can change your name, but the records remain the same."

"Oh, I figured it that way too. But how do you explain predicting the time of death?"

"Luck."

"Five times? And a couple of them almost to the minute?"

"Wait a minute. Who did obits on the day side?"

I thought about it for a few minutes. "A girl. College kid. Carol something."

"And she came in earlier than

the rest of the day crew, right? So they dream up a scheme. She gets the deaths after they occur and she puts the copy in the holdover box rather than sending it through the city desk."

"That's possible. I never thought of that."

"And I'll go you one better. I'll bet this Carol is either sitting in a top job at the *Post-Union* right now or she's married to R. Southgate Hawks."

It was a good theory, but it didn't hold water when I finally got back to Frankport. One thing I can say for Bobby, he always keeps a promise. Back when I told him I would try to get him a job on another paper, he said, "I'll remember this," and he did. He sent me a letter offering the night editorship and a healthy raise. I jumped at it.

I was on the old job for two weeks and was surprised to see so many new faces in the city room. In fact, none of the old night hands were still there. Bobby had made the paper into a dynamic news machine that kept me busy and happy.

In the old days under McCoy, editors and subeditors were serfs. However, Bobby's regime gave us new status. We were even invited to a Christmas reception at the Hawks home, and I looked for-

ward to it because I hadn't seen Bobby since I arrived. He now lived in a rarefied atmosphere of mergers with others papers and the management of three radio stations in the state.

I drove out to the Christmas reception with Millie Hogan, editor of the women's page. She had been lured away from a New York sheet and considered our boss in the same category as gods and saints. I gave a low whistle as we turned into the long drive that arced in front of the Hawks' Tudor mansion.

"Boy, he's come a long way from the obit desk," I said.

"Who?" Millie looked confused. "Mr. Hawks? R. Southgate Hawks actually worked the obit desk?"

"Not only worked it, he lived at it for fourteen months. And I was the guy who was going to get him a new job."

"You'll have to tell me about that," Millie said as I turned the car over to a parking attendant and we entered the main hall of the house.

The reception line was moving slowly, and I had a chance to get a good look at him. Seven years hadn't changed him much. He was more mature and expensively dressed, but he still exuded that same intent manner, that inner ability to make do with the things

at hand. The short-order cook had indeed become a master chef.

Millie whispered that the woman to Bobby's right was his wife.

"Hey, is her name Carol?"

"No, Martha."

Well, that exploded that theory. Mrs. Hawks wasn't the type of woman you would expect a rising media czar to marry. She was a plain woman, in dress and in features. There was a sense of calm control about her, and when I shook her hand, I was impressed by its firmness. Bobby, or rather Mr. Hawks, smiled and asked me how things were going on the night side.

"Well, it's a lot different than the old days," I said jokingly, but he didn't laugh.

Once through the line, I joined Millie at the eggnog bowl.

"What did you say to Mr. Hawks?" she asked me between sips. "He looked a little angry."

I mumbled an "I don't know" but I had an idea. "Martha Hawks looks a little out of place, doesn't she?"

"It's got to be true love, let me tell you. I'm relatively new in town, but they tell me that he gave up a passel of beauties when

the late Mr. McCoy made him city editor. He was considered 'the catch' in this town."

"Did she ever work on the paper? I don't remember her."

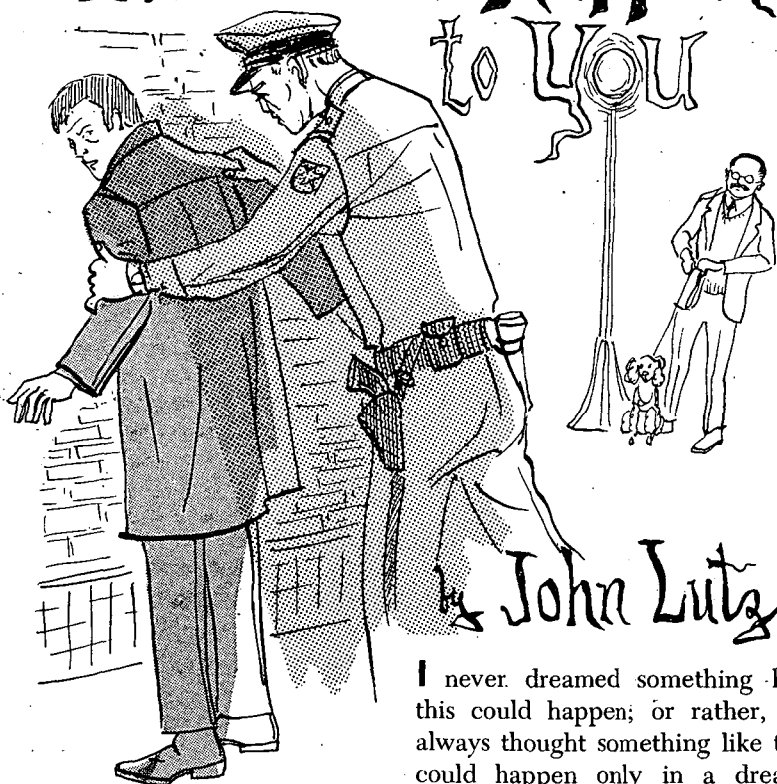
"No, I did an interview with her last year. Nothing extraordinary. Born upstate and came here about ten years ago. She was a nurse at St. Luke's for a time."

I have never brought up Bobby's tenure on the obit desk to anyone again. I like my job. As for how they did it, I have convinced myself that she simply asked doctors the prognosis on terminal cases and then took a rough, professional calculation on the time of death. Of course, there is the alternative which I won't allow myself to think about.

Yet every Christmas, when I go to that reception and shake hands with Mrs. Hawks, the awesome thought creeps into my mind. Those strong fingers, cold and firm, the arms lean and sinewy . . . a pillow . . . a weakened, terminal patient . . . I always dismiss the idea immediately. That is, until I shake hands with R. Southgate Hawks and look into those determined blue eyes—the eyes of a man who can make the most of a limited situation.

*It is said that even angels could do no more than act the best
the circumstance allows.*

It Could Happen to You



by John Lutz

I never dreamed something like this could happen; or rather, I'd always thought something like this could happen only in a dream. Yet looking back at it piece by piece, it's easy to understand how

it did happen. It was just a chance combination of circumstances, none of those circumstances so unbelievable by itself. It's the sort of thing that could happen to anybody; to you.

There'd been some mix-up in the flight schedule, so here I was with a six-hour layover in a city a thousand miles from home. It was a big city, and a nice summer night, so I decided to take a little walk around the downtown area, just to look things over.

That was at eleven o'clock, maybe too late for that kind of walk on a week night. There wasn't much happening downtown, only a few night spots here and there open; or maybe I'd just picked the wrong part of town in which to walk. Come to think of it, there can't be any doubt I picked the wrong part of town.

I strolled innocently along, my light raincoat slung over my arm against any threat of rain. I'd stopped in a few places that looked fairly respectable, staying in each for only one drink and a few words of conversation before going back outside and resuming my wandering. Walking around and sort of taking in the atmosphere of strange cities is a habit of mine. My job keeps me traveling just enough not to get bored with it, so I'm usually interested

in new places, and I knew I'd probably never get back to this city.

It was almost one o'clock when I noticed my wallet was missing. I was on Nineteenth Street at the time, idly walking along and looking in the windows of the closed shops.

A lost wallet; nothing so unusual about that. You've probably lost your wallet at some time and felt that sudden rush of helplessness. Well, that feeling's even stronger in a strange city, in case you've never had the experience. Everything that gave me a sense of identity or security was in that wallet, my driver's license, my folding money, my credit cards . . .

For a moment I stood in bewilderment, checking my other pockets, but of course the wallet wasn't in any of them. A wallet's the sort of thing you automatically return to the right pocket. I hurried back along the almost deserted streets toward The Posh Parrot on Twelfth Avenue, the last cocktail lounge I'd been in, all the time keeping my eyes to the ground on the off-chance I might see the wallet where it had fallen from my pocket.

The Posh Parrot was closed, the neon sign in its window dull and lifeless, the window itself throw-

ing back a pale reflection of my worried self.

I told myself it didn't matter. If I had lost the wallet in the lounge and someone had picked it up he'd probably taken it with him. Now I distinctly remembered sliding the wallet back into my hip pocket after paying for my drink; I even remembered folding the corner of a fifty-dollar bill to mark it from the smaller denominations. I began retracing my route back to Nineteenth Street, figuring the wallet must have slipped out of my pocket somewhere along the way.

No luck. What was I going to do? What would you do?

Even the ticket for the last leg of my trip home was in that wallet. I felt suddenly like a vagrant, a trespasser. I realized what a difference a dozen credit cards and a few hundred dollars' cash make in our society.

The only thing I could do was phone Laurie, my wife, and get her to wire me some money. I felt in my other pocket and, among keys, comb and ball-point pen, could muster only a nickel and two pennies. So much for that inspiration.

To make me feel worse, a light drizzle began to fall, and I hurriedly slipped on my raincoat and turned up the collar. I was walk-

ing forlornly, head down, hands jammed into my coat pockets, so I didn't see the man walking the poodle toward me until we were only about a hundred feet from each other.

My awkwardness and embarrassment about trying to borrow money from a stranger, combined with the short period of time I had to come up with what I was going to say, made my throat suddenly dry. You'd feel the same way.

I stopped directly in front of the man, a little guy with wire-framed glasses and a droopy moustache, and he stood staring at me with alarm.

"Would it be possible for you to lend a stranger some money?" is what I meant to say, and then I was going to explain the reason to him. I was ill at ease, as nervous as the little man appeared, and my voice croaked so I guess he only heard the last part of the sentence, the word "money." He backed up a step, and his poodle sensed his fear and my nervousness, and began to growl.

The man's droopy moustache trembled. "I don't have much," he said, "honest . . ." I saw his eyes dart down to the bulge of my right hand in my raincoat pocket, and I understood.

"Wait a minute," I started to

say, but I saw him glance off to his right and his eyes grew even wider behind his thick glasses. I looked and saw the cop almost on us.

"Trouble?" the cop asked. He was young and rangy, built more like a cigarette-ad cowboy than a cop.

"In a way, Officer," I said.

"He was trying to hold me up!" the little man almost screamed, and his poodle started growling again.

"I thought so," the cop said. "I was watching from across the street."

I felt my heart fall like a meteor. "Hey, no, wait a minute!" I was shoved roughly so that I had to support myself against the side of a building with both hands.

"Be careful!" I heard the little man shout. "He's got a gun in his right coat pocket!"

The cop's hands searched me the way they'd been trained in the police academy, and I knew by his unsteadiness that he was nervous. All three of us were standing there frightened. Even the dog was frightened.

"He was bluffing you," the cop said. "They do that." He jerked me up straight and held onto my arm.

"Bluffing? I was only trying to borrow some money!"

The young cop let out a sharp laugh. "A polite mugger, huh?"

"This is insane!" I said.

The cop shrugged. "So plead that way in court."

"I'll press charges!" the little man kept saying. "You can be sure of that!"

The cop was ignoring him now, reciting my rights in a low monotone. He was even ignoring me somewhat as he droned on about my "right to remain silent." He was really going to do it! I might really be going to jail! Even if I wasn't convicted, what would the arrest mean to my family, my friends and job?

I panicked then, and in what seemed at the time a lucky break, a bus turned the corner and lumbered toward us. I remember one headlight was out and the wiper blades were swinging back and forth out of rhythm. The bus was only doing ten or fifteen miles an hour, and when it was almost even with us I jerked out of the cop's grip and darted in front of it, around it. The front bumper even brushed my pants leg, but I didn't care.

Now the bus was between me and the law and I had a few precious seconds to run for freedom. The bus driver helped me by slamming on his brakes, probably stopping the bus directly in front

of the cop so he had to run around it. I was running down an alley, not looking back or even thinking back, when I heard the shot. In my state, the bark of the gun only made me run faster. I turned the corner, flashed across the rain-slick street and cut through another alley. That alley led to a parking lot, and I ran through there to the next street. I slowed then, listening but hearing no footsteps behind me. I knew I wouldn't have much time, though. The cop was probably calling in for help right now.

I walked for three more blocks and I saw a cab. It scared me at first; I'd thought the lettering on the door signified a police car. Then I saw that the light atop the car was blue, and there was a liquor advertisement on the trunk. I waved to the cab and climbed in with deliberate casualness when it stopped to pick me up.

"Regent Hotel," I said, trying to keep my breathing level. Didn't every city have a Regent Hotel?

"Torn down," the cabby said, glancing over his shoulder. "You mean the Regency?"

"That's it," I said, and we drove on in silence.

After about ten minutes I saw an all-night drugstore ahead of us and I had the cabby pull over.

"I'll only be a minute," I told

him. "I want to see if they'll fill an out-of-town prescription for insulin."

"Sure." He settled back in his seat and stared straight ahead.

It was a big drugstore, with a few other customers in it. The pharmacist behind the counter gave me a funny look and I smiled and nodded at him and walked over to the magazine rack. After leafing through a news magazine, I replaced it in the rack and walked over to a display of shaving cream as if it interested me. From there I walked out the side door.

I walked until I was clear of the drugstore's side display windows and ran for three or four blocks. I turned a corner then and started walking at a fast pace, but slow enough so that my breathing evened out.

I must have walked over a mile, trying to think things out, trying to come up with some kind of an idea. The agonizing thing was that nothing that had happened was really my fault. You could be in this same kind of mess sometime, just like me. Anybody could.

If only-I had some money, I thought, I could get a plane or bus ticket. The police didn't watch bus terminals or airports for every fleeing street-corner bandit. If I could get free of this city,

get back home a thousand miles away, I'd be safe. After all, no one had my name or address. The cop hadn't gotten any identification from me when he searched me because I wasn't carrying any. It would be as if none of this had ever happened. Eventually Laurie and I would joke about it. You and your spouse joke about that kind of thing.

Right now, though, things were a far cry from a joke! If I didn't get out of town fast I might well wind up ruined, in prison!

I was in more of a residential part of town now, wide lawns, neat ranch houses and plenty of trees. The moon was out and it had stopped raining, and I saw the man walking toward me when he was over a block away, on the other side of the street. The desperation surged up in me, took control of me. You can understand how I felt. There was no time now to make phone calls or wait for money. I had to get away fast, and to get away fast I needed money. I stooped and picked up a white grapefruit-sized rock from

alongside someone's gravel driveway.

Crossing the street diagonally toward the man, I squeezed the rock concealed in my raincoat pocket, smiling when I got close enough for the man to see my face.

He was carrying enough money for a plane ticket to a nearby city, where I had Laurie send me enough to get home. At home, though, where I'd thought I'd be safe, I still think about it all the time.

I'd never had any experience in hitting someone's head with a rock, so how was I to know? I was scared, like you'd be, scared almost out of my senses, so I struck harder than I'd intended—much harder.

Think about it and it's kind of frightening. I mean, here's this stranger, on his way home from work on the late shift, or from his girlfriend's house, or maybe from some friendly poker game. Then somebody he's never seen before walks up and for no apparent reason smashes his skull with a rock. It could happen to you.



Yes, it is true that in certain cases one must make exceptions.



I approached the desk clerk. "Do you have a spare key to room 4168?"

"You've lost yours, sir?"

"No. My wife has the key. But she's either gone out or she's inside asleep. I suppose I could

wake her by pounding on the door, but she's a heavy sleeper and I'd prefer not to create a scene in the process."

He checked the register. "Room 4168? James Dodson?"

I nodded. "Mr. and Mrs. James Dodson."

He pursed his lips for a moment. "The register lists only a James Dodson."

I peered at the inverted name for a moment and then shrugged. Apparently I had registered myself only; possibly wishful thinking.

Mildred and I had arrived here at two-thirty in the morning. We had intended to get in much earlier, but I'd had trouble with the car, trouble which still hadn't been properly diagnosed by a succession of crossroad mechanics.

After registering we had gone up to our room, accompanied by the bellboy with our luggage. Before retiring I had set my traveling alarm for seven.

When the alarm rang, I had left Mildred to her sleep, and driven the car in search of a garage. I

had found one some eight blocks from the hotel and left the car there. On the walk back, I had stopped at a restaurant for breakfast.

All in all, I had been gone for an hour or possibly an hour and a half. When I reached our room, Mildred had not answered my tentative knocks.

The desk clerk handed me a key and I took the elevator back up to the fourth floor. I inserted the key into the lock and opened the door.

Mildred was not in bed. The door to the bathroom was ajar and I could see that she was not in there either.

I shrugged. Probably she had gone out for breakfast, though usually she was a late sleeper.

I sat down. The day outside had begun hot and muggy and it would not improve, but the room was comfortably cool. Frankly, I would have preferred to spend the day up here—the room was quiet and relaxing—but Mildred would drag me about the oceanside in search of what she deemed a vacation.

There was a knock at the door. It was the maid to change the sheets and tidy up the room.

Mildred had spent the night on the twin bed nearer the window, but now I noticed that it ap-

peared to be neatly made up, as though it hadn't been slept in at all. My bed, on the other hand, was considerably rumpled.

The maid finished my bed and appeared about to skip Mildred's.

"My wife slept there last night," I said.

The maid glanced at me for a moment, shrugged, then pulled back the blankets. From where I sat, it seemed that the sheets were still crisp and ironed. The maid sighed, but changed them.

She began dusting things here and there, then got down on her hands and knees to peer under the beds.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"The other ash tray. There are supposed to be two in this type room. One on each bedside table. But one's missing."

I helped her look, but we did not find the other ash tray.

She regarded me obliquely. "Sometimes the guests accidentally pack an ash tray in their luggage when they leave."

I stared at her coldly. "I am not leaving. Besides, I steal only towels and soap."

When she was done and gone, I took off my jacket and opened the closet to hang it up. My clothes still hung there in a neat row, but Mildred's things were gone.

I frowned. I had seen her unpack her suitcases before she turned in and she had hung up her things. I was positive of that, and she had left her empty suitcases beside her bed.

Her suitcases were gone too.

Strange. I opened the bureau drawers. My shirts and underwear were there and in order, but the other drawers were empty.

I moved to the bathroom. My toothbrush in its plastic case and a small tube of toothpaste lay on the basin counter, but only *my* toothbrush. Mildred's was missing. Yet she had brushed her teeth before retiring. She made a ritual out of it.

I searched the room more thoroughly. There was not a trace of Mildred's things, not even the hotel key. It was almost as though she had never been in this room at all.

I sat down again. It was all most peculiar. If she had merely gone out for breakfast, surely she wouldn't have taken along bag and baggage.

I smiled at a pleasant thought. Suppose Mildred had decided to leave me. I sighed. Mere fantasy, I was afraid.

There was really nothing to do but wait a bit. No sense in running about creating noise. There was some logical explanation to

this and Mildred would return soon and clear up everything.

I turned on the television set and became absorbed in a program on cooperating in early colonial America. That was followed by a segment on the collecting of antique glass beer bottles, whole and fragmented. Even *The Busy Knitter* proved fascinating. At home, Mildred's daytime television viewing was reserved exclusively for serials and game shows.

At the onset of *Sesame Street*, I turned off the set. I rather wished I'd brought some books along. However, spending a vacation with Mildred does not leave allowance for anything as intelligent as reading.

I went to the window and looked down at the street. There they were, the people moving and sweating in the sun, dragging whining sunburned children from place to place, desperately telling themselves they were having a glorious time. Why the devil didn't people have sense enough to spend their vacations in their own comfortable air-conditioned homes, surrounded by the conveniences of modern life?

Actually, Mildred had left our home a week before I did. She had spent that time with her sister in Pennsylvania and then taken the local bus to Harrisburg. I had

picked her up at the bus depot and we had continued on to the coast.

I sat down in the easy chair again. Why had I married Mildred in the first place? We really had nothing in common, even now. All the money was still firmly in her name. By marrying Mildred, I had achieved security, though not serenity and prosperity.

Had Mildred gone down to breakfast and met with some accident? Surely I would be notified, wouldn't I? In time. She had plenty of identification on her, including the tagged hotel key.

I frowned. There was that baggage to consider. That indicated a certain *design*. She had left *with* her luggage. It was not simply a matter of stepping out to breakfast.

My eyes went to the second twin bed again.

Suppose, just *suppose*, that Mildred had actually run off with another man. How could she possibly have attracted him? She was six years older than the day I had married her and time had lent no improvement to her beauty, nature, or tongue. Besides, I rather felt that if there were another man, I would know about him. I am not entirely unobservant.

At noon I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for lunch and

then stepped outside of the building, intending to take a walk. I stopped in my tracks. The temperature was at least in the mid-nineties with a commensurate high humidity. It was insane to venture out in such a hostile atmosphere, and yet the streets were teeming with perspiring flesh and bad tempers.

I stepped back into the hotel, picked up some paperbacks at the stand in the lobby, and went back up to the coolness of my room. I telephoned room service, ordered a bottle of brandy sent up, and spent the afternoon reading and sipping brandy. By six, Mildred still had not returned.

Was it actually possible that she had run away with someone? Surely not with any of our socioeconomic peers—but possibly some ambitious chauffeur?

I chuckled. We had no chauffeur. Just a cook, who lived out, and a housekeeper who lived in and was really quite sullen about her status.

I stared at Mildred's bed again. Why should she have made up her bed before leaving? Did she even know *how*? As far as I could remember, she had never made a bed in our entire married life.

I sipped more brandy.

The Prescotts had a chauffeur, a ratty-looking little man; and the

Dormans, though their chauffeur was really a college student hired for the summer to transport the Dorman children to tennis lessons and such nonsense.

If not a chauffeur, why not a gardener? We had no gardener either. The Acme AAA Landscaping and Lawn Service people sent over two men once a week during the summer and adequately cared for our half an acre. Could it be one of them?

I resisted the impulse to giggle. If not a chauffeur or gardener, why not a gamekeeper? There ought to be some of those around somewhere.

By eight o'clock, I felt quite happy, fuzzy, and sleepy. I yawned and lay down on the bed. When I woke, it was nearly 11:30. Mildred still had not come back.

I sat up slowly. I could still feel the effects of the brandy, though not as pleasantly as before. I am really not a drinking man—perhaps three or four times a year on festive occasions is enough for me. I took some aspirin.

If Mildred had run away with someone, would she have left without her money? Of course not. Mildred was quite sensible about money. She would never abandon it, I felt certain, despite any passion involved.

Had she been liquidating her as-

sets behind my back? I shook my head. No. That was not possible. Liquidating one's assets is not done by a snap of one's fingers. It takes time. Too, I was aware of the placement of every penny of her money and none of it had been moved.

Yet Mildred was missing—bag and baggage.

I went back to the brandy. When a wife disappears without a word, people, especially the police, have a tendency to suspect the worst—possibly foul play—and the husband is invariably the chief suspect, especially if he were somewhat tardy in reporting his wife's disappearance.

I would have to report Mildred's disappearance here and now, this moment. I put on my jacket, took a bit more brandy to steady me, and took the elevator to the main floor.

It was nearly midnight and the desk clerks appeared to be changing shifts. I recognized one of them as the man who had been at the desk when Mildred and I arrived.

I spoke to him. "Pardon me, but how does one go about reporting a missing wife? Which authorities do I notify and such?"

Both desk clerks appeared immediately interested, and Hames—I learned his name later—spoke.

"Mr. James Dodson?" he asked.

I felt somewhat flattered that he remembered my name, especially my first. I had no idea I made such a strong impression on strangers.

Hames smiled. "You said something about a wife?"

"Yes. I haven't seen her since seven this morning when I went out to see about some car repairs. I thought she might have gone shopping or something of the sort, but she still hasn't come back and, frankly, I'm beginning to get just a little worried."

Hames back-turned a few pages of the register. "Ah, yes. James Dodson. That is the only name we have here. No wife."

I smiled. "I don't care what the register says. I came here with a wife and she's missing."

Hames appeared apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir. But I distinctly remember that when you registered, you were alone. Absolutely alone."

I blinked.

So did the clerk going off duty. His name subsequently proved to be Mulligan. He was a small, sharp-featured man who rather reminded me of the Prescotts' chauffeur.

I tried a laugh. "When I registered, I had a wife with me. One is hardly likely to forget some-

thing like that, is one?" I said.

Hames agreed. "No, sir. However, you were alone." He turned to a group of bellboys, all ears; lounging close by, and beckoned imperiously.

One of them detached himself immediately and trotted to the desk. I now recognized him as the same man who had carried our bags up to our room.

"This man," Hames said, indicating me, "says he registered here with his wife. If I remember correctly, you took his bags up?"

The bellboy nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir. But it was just him, sir. He was alone. He didn't have any wife with him or any other woman either."

I stared at him. "She is a tall, large-boned, unforgettable woman who wore a monstrous red hat."

"I'm sorry, sir," the bellboy said, "but you were alone."

I am not one to doubt my sanity, my intelligence, or my eyes. My wife had been with me when I registered. Hames had been at the desk. Come to think of it, Hames and the bellboy had been the only people about at that hour of the morning.

Yet now the two of them lied. Why?

Mulligan edged into the conversation with a sharp-toothed smile. "Not that I wish to alarm you, sir,

but have you tried calling hospitals? Did she carry identification with her?"

"She has plenty of identification. I think I would have been notified by now if anything had happened to her."

Mulligan nodded. "I think we'd better call in the police, sir. Among other things, they could search the hotel from top to bottom."

Hames glared at him. "This is *my* shift. You have been officially relieved for the last five minutes. If the police are to be called, I will make that decision."

Why should Hames and the bellboy lie? My mind suddenly leaped to the ultimate. Was this more than just a disappearance? Was foul play indeed involved? Was Mildred dead? Murdered? Were Hames and the bellboy deeply involved in the death? If they were, undoubtedly they had arranged some sort of self-protection or alibi—and this was it?

I found myself faintly perspiring.

Would that leave *me* vulnerable? In a murder situation it hardly seemed wise for me to have been the last person to have seen Mildred alive. The police tend to fasten on situations like that.

Wouldn't it be more intelligent

if I said that Mildred had *failed* to meet me at that bus station in Harrisburg? I'd had trouble with the car and been late. I had assumed that she had gotten tired of waiting for me and had continued on by other means. That would mean her sister was the last one to see Mildred alive. Let *her* do the explaining and the sweating? After all, she was into Mildred's will by at least a third.

What, after all, was really the point in my insisting that I had come here with Mildred? Hames and the bellboy were here to contradict me—for their own reasons—and they outnumbered me, two to one.

If I scratched their backs, so to speak, they would scratch mine.

I smiled vacuously and hiccupped. "To be absolutely honest, I don't really remember registering at *all* last night." I grinned, and exhaled essence of brandy about me. "I remember waking up this morning, but that's about it. Did somebody have to help me up to my room?"

Hames quickly appropriated that. "You were just a bit under the weather, I'm afraid, sir." He indicated the bellboy. "Eddie had to help you up. You went to sleep as soon as he put you down on the bed."

I hiccupped again. "What I

really need is a little old drink and I've got that in my room." I moved back toward the elevators, managing to stagger a bit.

I found Mulligan guiding me by the elbow. "I'll see you to your room, sir. But I still think that you ought to notify the police."

"Nonsense," I snapped. "I have these hallucinations about my wife all the time."

"Are you positive it was a hallucination, sir?"

"Positive. Mildred never wears red hats. Can't stand the color. Whenever I see her wearing a red hat, I know I'm hallucinating."

"But you didn't seem to think that you had been hallucinating when you approached the desk."

"Sometimes it takes me longer than usual to realize I've been hallucinating."

Mulligan accompanied me up in the elevator. "Have you and your wife been traveling in India or the Far East lately? When you last saw your wife, did she appear a bit ill? Did she show any traces of the bubonic plague?"

I stared at him.

He had sharp yellow-black eyes. "Suppose she contracted a plague, though not necessarily bubonic. It would be bad for the hotel's image, not to mention a threat to the entire region's tourist trade. Suppose Hames tried to cover it

up? He spirited away the corpse and pretended that nothing had happened, even to the extent of maintaining that your wife had never been here in the first place. I wouldn't put anything past Hames and his brother."

"His brother?"

"Yes. The bellboy. Eddie. He's an ex-convict, you know. Breaking and entering."

At the door of my room, Mulligan peered intently at the number plate.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I thought it just possible that the number plate on this door might have been switched. But I see that there is dust here that couldn't have accumulated in just one night. Are you certain this is the same floor Eddie took you to last night?"

"I have never lost a floor in my life." I unlocked the door and left Mulligan outside.

I now dismissed entirely the idea that Mildred had run away. Something had happened to her, and the Hames brothers were deeply involved.

Eddie was an ex-convict; breaking and entering.

I had left this room at approximately seven a.m. Mildred had been stirring when I left. Had she gone back to sleep or had she de-

cided to go out for breakfast?

Had Eddie seen both of us leave this room? Had he let himself in and begun rummaging among our things?

Since Mildred's breakfast usually consists of a cup of coffee, she had returned too soon, had walked in on Eddie, caught him in the act. There had been a struggle. He had struck her with something. The missing ash tray? Those things always seem to be around when you need them—and Mildred had died.

Eddie had gone to his brother and told him what had happened. They had decided that if the body were found, Eddie, being the hotel's only ex-convict, would be immediately suspected. They had decided not only to get rid of the body, but to make it appear that Mildred had never been here at all.

But wouldn't that still leave a rather sticky situation for them? I would insist that I had come here with Mildred and they would insist that I hadn't. The police would undoubtedly be called in to referee.

Wouldn't it have been much better for Hames and his brother if they had just maintained that they *saw* Mildred walk out of the hotel, with or without baggage?

I poured brandy and tried to

think. A half hour later, there was a knock at my door.

It was Mulligan, rubbing his hands. "I managed to sneak a look at the register. Page 79 is missing."

"I fail to see any significance in that."

Mulligan giggled slightly. "I think I see it all. When you came here with your wife, you registered as Mr. & Mrs. James Dodson on the top line of a new page. Page 79, to be exact. But later, Hames, for his own nefarious reasons, tore out that page and copied your name, and the names of guests who registered subsequently to you, on page 81."

"What happened to page 80?"

"Well, page 79 is on one side of the sheet, and page 80 on the other."

"How clever of you hotel people. But I did not come here with my wife. Nor did I register the both of us. I registered only myself. I now *distinctly* remember that as I was signing in—in my fumbling condition—I accidentally tore the page nearly in half. So Hames removed it entirely from the register and I signed the next page."

Mulligan stared at me, a revolting half-smile on his face. "If you weren't involved with the Hames brothers before, you appear to be

now." His eyes seemed to glitter. "I don't know the reason for all of this, but I will find out. I know how to put two and two together."

I had the sinking feeling that he did, and would. I shut the door in his face and went back to the brandy.

What about Mildred's body? Not to mention her luggage. Can one blithely cart a body out of a hotel at eight or so in the morning without running the high risk of being seen? No. The most obvious thing to do would be to store it in another room until it could be picked up at a more convenient time. Possibly in the early hours of this very morning? Where would this room be? Close by, certainly, and the closer, the better.

Inspired by my rationale, I stepped into the corridor. I moved cautiously to the door immediately to the right of mine. Slowly I turned the knob. The door was unlocked and I eased it open a crack.

The room was quite occupied by two people of the opposite sexes. That much was readily apparent and they were both very alive, active, and preoccupied.

I quickly closed the door. Why the devil didn't people have the decency to lock their doors when

they were doing things like that?

Obviously I couldn't continue going up and down the corridor trying doors. There was no telling what I might stumble into.

My eyes went to an unnumbered door squarely at the end of the corridor. The service closet? Would Mildred's body be in there? Not very likely, but it would be a perfect place for me to hide and watch, in the event that someone chose to retrieve Mildred's body from wherever it was stored.

I fetched the bottle of brandy from my room and made myself as comfortable as possible among the mops, pails, and detergents in the service closet, leaving the door slightly ajar. I waited, sipping brandy. At 2:30 I restrained the considerable impulse to break into song, namely "Abdul Abulbul Ameer."

By three o'clock I had finished the bottle and was contemplating a return to my room, when I heard the high squeak of wheels and Eddie hove into view, pushing a hand truck on which reposed a large steamer trunk. He trundled it farther down the corridor to a door, opened it, and disappeared inside.

I waited ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. What was taking him so long?

Finally the door opened again and Eddie appeared, wheeling the hand truck with its steamer trunk, on top of which reposed Mildred's two suitcases.

I opened the service room door and stepped out, lurching just slightly. "Ah, ha! Do you deny for a moment that a corpse resides in that trunk?"

Eddie whitened and then sighed. "I don't deny it, but I got to talk to my brother. He does the thinking for both of us."

"Very well," I said stiffly. "You may use the phone in my room."

Eddie wheeled his cargo into my room and used the phone. He wiped his forehead. "My brother will be right up."

I folded my arms. "You murdered my wife because she caught you red-handed trying to ransack our room."

Eddie looked hurt. "I wasn't ransacking. Just looking. I been going straight for seven years now and I got a wife and three kids. I don't steal anymore, but I still got the hobby."

"Hobby?"

"I go through people's stuff and figure how much I *could* steal if I wanted to. But it's all on paper. Last year I could've cleared over forty grand, but I never took a thing."

"But my wife caught you and

she *thought* you were stealing?"

He nodded glumly. "She came at me swinging this purse, and I ducked. Her heel caught on something and she fell. Her head hit the ash tray on the night table and broke it right in two. The ash tray, I mean. Didn't do her head much good either. But it was a swift death, sir. She felt no pain, I assure you."

"Why didn't you just leave the premises? Why all this hocus-pocus?"

"Fingerprints," Eddie said. "Even if the police thought it was an accident, they'd still go through the routine of covering the room for fingerprints. Just in case. And I left mine all over the place. So how would I explain that to them? Me, an ex-con. I didn't wear no gloves because I wasn't going to steal anything, so why bother? I left fingerprints in places that I couldn't even remember, so there was no point in even trying to wipe them off. I told my brother what happened and we decided that the only thing to do was get rid of the body so that nobody would even think murder."

"But why take the luggage too?"

"Because when she fell she got blood on the suitcases. She didn't bleed much. Just on the suitcases,

one of which was open, and a blanket that was draped on the floor. So we had to get rid of all that. And we knew that when the police investigated your missing wife and found that her *empty* suitcases were gone too, they'd do a lot of probing because people just don't disappear with empty suitcases. That meant we had to pack up all the rest of her things too. We decided that it would be best just to pretend that she had never been here in the first place and it would be our word against yours."

"Wouldn't it have been simpler if you and your brother had simply said that you *saw* her leave the hotel? With the baggage?"

"We thought of that too, but somebody would have had to carry her baggage downstairs, and the doorman would have had to call a cab. And the concession stands were open and them people got sharp eyes. A lot of people would have had to remember seeing her go. Like you said, she was big-boned and such and hard to overlook."

"What were you going to do with my wife's body?"

"My brother's got this piece of land up north with an old dry well. We thought we'd dump her down there and just fill it to the top with dirt. Nobody would ever

know one damn thing about it."

There was a knock at the door and I let Hames into the room.

He glanced quickly about the room, at the trunk, and then at his brother. "What have you told him?"

Eddie cleared his throat. "Practically nothing."

Hames rubbed his hands. "Let me see. What do we have here? You, Mr. Dodson, called the desk. You requested that a steamer trunk be sent up to your room. Eddie brought it up. You told him to return in twenty minutes. He did. You told him to take the trunk downstairs to the basement where you would arrange to have it picked up later. Eddie noticed bloodstains on the suitcases."

Here Hames turned over the suitcases, revealing dark blotches. "And considering all of this hanky-panky business about a missing wife, he immediately suspected something amiss and called me. And here I am. Shall we open the trunk or shall I leave that to the police?"

"Now just one damn minute," I said, righteously outraged. "You aren't going to pin this on me."

Hames smiled. "Why not? It is our word against yours. We are *two* and you are *one*."

I countered. "Eddie's fingerprints are all over this room and

probably also on the *inside* of that trunk. How will you explain *that* to the police?"

Hames pondered for a moment. "Very well, then, sir. If Eddie and I must go to prison, we will take you with us. We will maintain that you *hired* us to murder your wife."

Eddie regarded him with admiration. "That's right. If we got to go down, we take everybody with us."

Obviously they were prepared to drag me into this mess too. What, after all, did they have to lose? As a matter of fact, they might have considerable to gain if they cooperated with the police and testified against me.

Hames broke the impasse with a smile. "On the other hand, sir, why should mature men such as we go to the police at all? A lot of trouble for all *three* of us could be avoided if . . ." He shrugged.

I sighed—a sticky business. Hames did seem to have a point there.

"And what about Eddie's children?" Hames said. "Without his guidance and counseling in future years they will probably become delinquents."

Eddie wiped at one eye.

The last touch had hardly been necessary. I stared at them coldly. "So be it. Take the body and dispose of it. What is done cannot be undone."

Eddie prepared to leave with his cargo. "I'll unload the trunk in the station wagon and then bring it back up for your wife's body, Mr. Dodson."

I stared at him. "My wife's body isn't in the trunk?"

"No, sir," Eddie said. "I was just about to put her into the trunk when Mulligan jumped out of the closet. I guess he put two, and two together, like he always claimed he could, and he was waiting for me. What he had in mind wasn't the police. It was blackmail. For all three of us." Eddie coughed slightly. "I guess I broke another ash tray. Mulligan's in the trunk."

Hames sighed. "I suppose I'll have to arrange a reason for Mulligan's disappearance. A shortage in the hotel's accounts should cover it."

When they left, I gave Eddie five dollars. Ordinarily I do not subscribe to overtipping, but there are exceptions.

Then I hiccupped genuinely and went to bed.

The innocently guilty may be more knowledgeable than they admit.



The three sisters, Amabelle, Amanda and Amalia, looking like slightly withered flowers, clustered in a drooping bouquet on their front porch. They separated as I wheeled my Volks into the dirt yard, as if each were plucked individually and placed against the porch railing, and when I stepped from the car to stand in the dust the required distance from "the girls," as they were always called, they turned up their vaguely smiling flower faces in welcome.

"I am Jane Flagg," I announced unnecessarily. They nodded in unison.

There is a rule, in this isolated

hill country, that visitors bide their time, keep their distance and wait, to be asked to enter, so I leaned against the car and went through the formalities of asking about the health of each, agreeing that the weather was fine indeed and discussing the condition of the crops before ever revealing the nature of my visit.

The three wore dotted swiss dresses, ruffled and ribboned—probably hand-sewn by Amanda from material stolen by their father thirty years ago out of a box-car that had been shunted to a siding. At least, the story went that way. It was said then that the

old man carted away enough bolts of cloth to cover those girls for the rest of their lives, and I guess that was true because you certainly don't see dotted swiss anymore.

Their hands, resting on the

The door was then opened and I was allowed to enter the house and observe Miss Amalia's exquisite china painting and the fine needlework of Miss Amanda. It was all there in the big square room where these three sisters had



porch railing, looked like two dead brown birds and four dead pale birds and I knew the time was ripe to state my mission. I took a step toward the porch and said, "I guess you know that I've opened up a shop in my folks' old home place down in Mountain Hollow." Three heads inclined.

"I hope you might permit me to display some of your fine handiwork."

lived together for more than sixty years.

A huge stone fireplace, with an iron-doored kiln built at the side, took up most of one wall. Wide-planked, boxed-in stairs led to the second-story "sleep rooms." It was this big downstairs room that held the sisters' lives, all of their dreams and the fruit of their talents.

I walked over Miss Amanda's

beautifully stitched hooked rugs and touched the heavy splendor of her crewel work that curtained the crude tiny-paned windows. Miss Amalia's china-painting art made of the big, dark, heavy-beamed room a bright garden spot with violets and roses climbing the plates, pitchers, cups and teapots shelved along the walls.

My customers would go mad!

The two sisters, Amanda and Amalia, unfolded with pride when I exclaimed my delight, and closed in again as soon as I asked for some of their treasures for my shop. "But you have so many," I said, overwhelmed by stacks of crocheted bedspreads, yards of embroidery and all the floral china, "so many things you don't use and that people would love to buy. Wouldn't you rather have the money?"

Two prim mouths pursed at mention of such an indelicate subject as money, and four tan eyes boycotted me . . . but Amabelle, not so proper as her sisters nor so impractical, briskly ordered Amalia to the shed for a bolt of "Daddy's flannelette to cut in squares and protect that nice rose-pattern tea set," and Amanda to get busy and "roll up a bedspread so the fringe won't tangle."

"Remember," Miss Amabelle said sternly, "it's time you began

to bring in a little money too."

That was how I was able to stock the Jane Flagg Old Time Store with china as beautiful as old Haviland and needlework as handsome as that of the Victorians, and how Amalia and Amanda finally became so money-hungry that they not only forgot their manners, but they hid the truth behind sweet-sounding words.

I remember the sisters from back when I was a little girl, and they seemed as old then as they do now—delicately breakable, fragile with age. My father used to say of the family that it had been weakened by cousin marrying cousin on down through so many years that the last three girls had come out a little half-baked. To that, my mother always answered with a reprimanding click of her tongue, which didn't stop my father for an instant. If he was in a story-telling mood, he'd go on with the one about Amanda. It seems Amanda, the seamstress, was given a box of needles (presumably heisted along with the bolts of cloth from the boxcar). Then it seems that Amanda, when selecting a needle for her work, was apt to toss several aside before finding the one she wished to use, which inter-

ested Amalia so that she asked, "Why are you throwing all those other needles on the floor?" and Amanda replied that it was because all the points were on the wrong ends, to which Amalia advised, "Don't throw them away. Keep them and use them on the other side of the goods."

Such apocryphal anecdotes are a form of humor in these parts, and the sisters, particularly Amalia and Amanda, came in for their full share. Not so much Amabelle, however. Amabelle was the smart one, normal enough to be restless in these isolated hills and normal enough to want money in a moneyless community. So Amabelle took off for the city, and there she got herself a factory job and worked long enough to come back to the place of her birth and draw Social Security.

One day each month she sprints down those mountain roads, picks up her Social Security check from Mrs. Milton Kearney at the post office, gets it cashed at the General Store, buys some supplies that she puts in an old flour sack and trudges back up the mountain.

That's the way it was, that is, until I moved back from the city and set up my store in the old family home and Amabelle came in to see what was the "mighty miration goin' on," and poked

around the shop that features old-time quilts and embroideries, featherwork, waxwork, woodwork. She said the things were mighty pretty, but she had two sisters who could put it all to shame, and I asked who they were. When she mentioned Amanda and Amalia, I remembered my father's old tales and knew who she was.

It was some months before I got up that way and was allowed to bring down the tea set and the bedspread, but from the first day Amabelle set foot in the shop and I got a load of that filled-up flour sack over her shoulder, I'd made sure Tommy was on hand to drive her home in his jeep.

They became good friends, Tommy and Miss Amabelle—that is, as good friends as Tommy ever makes and as good friends as Miss Amabelle would ever make; or anybody else in this mountain community. It's not that these people are unfriendly, but rather that they are shy and very private. They have taken Tommy to their hearts in their oblique and sometimes taciturn way, probably because they expect of Tommy only that which he can give. Which is good. It is, indeed, why I brought Tommy back here to where my roots are.

Brian, my ex-husband, Tommy's ex-father, wanted me to put him

away, wall him up, cage him in. Well, I didn't. I brought him home to Mountain Hollow where he is appreciated for all the qualities he does have and not looked down upon for those he lacks.

So Tommy, who is dependable within his sphere of ability, knew which day of the month Miss Amabelle could be expected and at what time on that day she would be ready to have him pack her and her supplies into his jeep and drive her up the mountain to her home.

Amanda's and Amalia's reluctance to part with their art for inadequate payment vanished the moment I sold the tea set and bedspread and sent them their money less the 20% commission I always charged. I'll bet it was the first cash they'd ever had in their lily-white hands, and it was surely the first they'd ever made by dint of their own efforts and they turned money-greedy! Each month after that, on the day Tommy drove Miss Amabelle and her supplies home, Misses Amalia and Amanda were ready for him with carefully rolled bedspread, folded and wrapped embroidery, flannel-ette-separated chinaware and outstretched hands in case something already on consignment might have been sold.

"Well, how are the girls?" I'd

ask Tommy once he'd carefully brought in the new merchandise.

"Fine, Mom," he'd say.

"What were they doing?" I'd ask as I laid out the beautiful painted china and unfolded the lovely stitchery.

"Golly, Mom, just waiting for me," he'd say as he turned, flat and squeaking on his rubber soles, eager to get out to his jeep so that he could shine the engine.

If Miss Amabelle had pressed him into a chore or two once the jeep was packed with china and embroidery, our dialogue became more extensive because, of course, there was more to tell. He would explain how he climbed to the roof to patch a shingle or leaned on the shovel to dig up a garden plot of ornery clay (in between the times that Tommy did these chores, Miss Amabelle crawled along the roof and patched her own shingles and leaned on the shovel and dug her own garden plots) . . . "And what was Miss Amanda doing then?" I asked. "Golly, Mom, she went right back to her sewing," which offered me a brief and involuntary wonder if she had trouble finding needles with points all on the same ends. "And Miss Amalia?" I requested patiently . . . "Golly, Mom, she went right back to her painting." I then asked about Miss Amabelle.

"She was showing me what to do, Mom, and telling me how to do it," said Tommy. And I bet she was doing just that. Miss Amabelle was a real pusher, and I had the feeling the outside work might be getting to be a little too much for her. She'd tell him what it was she needed done, and then she'd tell him to do it because she was going to give him a piece of gingerbread afterwards . . . the gingerbread to pay for his work; a rather backward approach, but logical. Miss Amabelle not only did all the outside work, she also did the cooking. I didn't know what those two fluttery sisters of hers would ever do if Amabelle goes first. Well, I was to find out.

It was spring and muddy, and Miss Amabelle's day. When she did not arrive, Tommy fretted all over the place at this break in his routine. Tommy in a fret is more mobile than oral—he gets his jeep engine shined to mirror-brightness and then he paces. Well, he was beside himself because this was Miss Amabelle's day and she had not appeared.

I raised my head from my books and said, "What's your problem?"

"It's Miss Amabelle, Mom," he said, his face a tangle of worry. "This is her day, Mom, and she

isn't here. Where could she be?"

"Well," I said, "maybe she's late."

He shook his head vigorously.

"It's muddy out," I said. "Maybe she decided to put it off for today, the mud is probably ankle-deep up on the mountain road . . ." I looked into Tommy's empty face with nothing to do, and suggested, "Why don't you drive up there, Tommy, bring her down and take her back again after she picks up her check and gets her supplies?"

Inspiration! His face broke into a beatific smile and he splayfooted it out of the shop on the instant.

I went back to my books, only lifting my head again when the jeep streaked past the shop and clattered over planking to rise the mountain road. Tommy was on his way.

There were no customers that afternoon. Since they are all city people, they rarely show in the middle of the week—even my weekend customers, with the energy crisis, were greatly minimized. So it was a quiet day and I got my bookwork all finished (I am no bookkeeper) when I realized the shop was getting dark and looked at the wigwag clock on the wall to discover that Tommy had been gone for five hours!

No Amabelle. No Tommy!

I sprang to my feet, raced to the front door, opened it and leaned out to see Mrs. Milton Kearney just as she locked the door of the post office. She nodded sedately and observed, in her precisely cool voice, that Miss Amabelle had not arrived to pick up her mail.

"I know," I said as Ellie Evans and Mr. Purvis emerged from the General Store across the street and called out, together, that Miss Amabelle had not been in to get her supplies.

"I know," I said.

The main street of Mountain Hollow was settling down to rest, but what had happened to Tommy during all those hours, and where was Miss Amabelle? The setting sun had faintly tinted the sky, leaving the caked dried mud of the road a glassy gray.

I panic the moment Tommy is not where he is supposed to be. It's not that I consciously think he might be in trouble, it's that I unconsciously think of all the trouble he could get into . . . and he never does—never, never, I told myself as I hurried through the living quarters behind the shop and flew out the back door to my Volks.

I wished I had chains—I shuddered at the thought of mud-slick

mountain roads under bald tires. I jumped in, drove from the back yard and around to the street. I braked and listened—that was when I heard the roar of the jeep as it clattered over the corrugation of planks from the mountain road to main Mountain Hollow. I leaned forward, watching as Tommy drove the jeep straight down the middle of the road as usual, swerving to the left as he parked in a fluid swish of mud before the shop.

I backed up behind the house, breathed a sigh of Tommy-relief, and went inside, through the house and to the shop. He was still out in front, of course, hood up, shining the engine in frantic haste to beat the gathering twilight.

He was mud to his knees! Why was he so all-over muddy?

I turned on the lights of the shop, prepared to wait, knowing it would be fruitless to ask questions before the jeep engine was sparkling bright. He folded his polishing cloths, stowed them away in the jeep and it was then that I realized he had brought no china or needlework down from the mountain just as he had brought no Miss Amabelle.

"Stop!" I cried as he opened the shop door and was about to step inside.

He looked up, shook his head in bewilderment and said, "Stop what, Mom?"

"Look at your shoes," I cried. "Stiff with mud! Take them off at the sill."

He leaned down, laboriously untied the tennis shoes and stepped out of them. I picked them up, led him through the house to the back porch, met a little resistance when I ordered him to take off his pants right out there before the world, but since the world was not out there after all, but in their homes preparing for supper, I convinced him it was a proper procedure under the circumstances.

While he took a bath, I banged the dirt-caked pants against the porch railing and left them there for washing day, then I hosed off the tennis shoes and brought them in to set before the oven.

"Now," I said to Tommy after his bath and while we were at supper, "how did you get so muddy? Did you have tire trouble on your way up?"

"Up to where, Mom?" he asked.

"Up to Miss Amabelle's house."

"She wasn't there, Mom."

"She wasn't where?" Our interlocation was beginning to sound like the zany conversational gambits in one of my father's folktales. "You mean she wasn't home?"

"She wasn't there when I did the digging."

"Digging?" I cried. "Why in the world were you digging? In all this mud!"

"Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda told me to. They said Miss Amabelle wanted me to dig a garden."

"Oh," I said, and started to eat. Then I put my fork down. "A garden?" I cried. "Now? In all the mud? Why, no one could grow anything in mud like this. It'll be a week or more before the ground's fit to dig and plant after all the rain."

I pushed back my plate while Tommy continued to shovel in the food, totally unconcerned, of course, as to the state of the ground for planting . . . being only the digger, who followed directions, and not a planter who must gauge weather conditions, seasonal changes, the dark of the moon . . . *And I bet that was it!* Or, anyway, some folklore rule that determined Miss Amabelle to get her potatoes-or-whatever planted by the dark of the moon or the light of the moon or however the moon on high might be, regardless of the ground below.

"Well, for heaven's sake," I exclaimed under my breath, a little resentful that poor Tommy had been pushed into a muddy, back-breaking job for no reason except,

perhaps, to follow a harebrained folk tradition. "I would have thought Miss Amabelle could have waited a week or so to have you dig up that garden . . ."

Tommy looked up. "It wasn't Miss Amabelle, Mom. It was Miss Amanda and Miss Amalia who told me Miss Amabelle wanted me to do it. They said Miss Amabelle was plumb wore out and went to sleep."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I exclaimed again. Miss Amabelle had probably scurried her old bones out there in the mud thinking to get her digging done and then scurry down the mountainside for her Social Security check; but "plumb wore out" with the digging, gave up and went to bed.

"Well," I said, "I hope she's all right."

"Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda said Miss Amabelle was sleeping right peaceful and they thanked me for digging the garden. They even sang songs to me, Mom."

"That was nice," I said.

"I sang with them . . ." Of course, my big, happy, singing sheep! "I didn't sing much, though. I was too tired and the ground was heavy and hard to dig."

"So that's how you got all muddy," I said. "You didn't have tire trouble after all."

"I had tired trouble," said Tommy; putting down his fork and smiling broadly at his own cleverness.

Now that I am becoming accustomed again to the strange doings of these mountain folk of mine, and able to interpret their reasons—sometimes—I thought no more about the muddy garden plot until a couple of days later, after the sun had come out hot and dried the mud to thick crust. Then I began to question Miss Amanda who came into the shop in a dotted swiss dress, her dotted swiss house slippers covered by a vintage pair of galoshes.

"Miss Amanda!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing in town?"

"I came for this," she said quaveringly as she dropped to the Shaker rocker and held up the brown window envelope that held Miss Amabelle's Social Security check, "and Mr. Purvis at the General Store wouldn't give me any money for it so I could get our supplies . . ."

"Well, no," I explained. "Miss Amabelle must endorse it first, and to endorse it she has to write her name on the back of the check." Then I asked why Miss Amabelle hadn't come into town for her own check as always. "Is she sick?"

"Oh, she's fine," said Miss

Amanda. "Miss Amabelle is as fine as angels' wings and as happy as a harp song. But I come down to get the check and nobody will let me have any money so I can buy the supplies for Amalia to cook." She held up the forlornly drooping flour sack to show how empty it was and started to cry.

Well, I thought, Miss Amabelle is finally delegating responsibility and not any too soon, either. Those sisters have been lounging over their art and stitches all the years she's been trudging down that mountain road and trudging back again to cook the food her money buys, and I leaned over to pat the heaving shoulders. "Well, now," I said, "I believe I have one of your hooked rugs here in the shop and I'm quite sure my hooked-rug customer will be in this weekend to buy it. How about if I give you the money now, and you can get your supplies?"

She was startled by a suggestion that offered new and uncharted paths for her sluggish brain to follow. "Then you can take the check back to Miss Amabelle and have her endorse it and Mr. Purvis will give you the money later," I explained. "By the time you have finished shopping, Tommy will be here and can drive you back up the mountain,"

which solved all her immediate problems and made her happy as a harp song (that was a strange aphorism—but then, these hill folk come up with strange ones, most of which I have forgotten). She clutched her money in a pale fist, tucked the brown window envelope down in the bodice of her dotted swiss dress and tripped off.

Just as expected, Tommy drove up in front of the shop at the same moment Miss Amanda emerged from the General Store, the half-filled flour sack over her shoulder. He helped her into the jeep, stowed the flour sack in back and took off in a splatter of half-dried mud, with Miss Amanda clutching the edge of the jeep door for dear life. It was probably the first time she'd ever ridden in anything faster than a rocking chair.

I didn't think about it . . . I simply did not think. That's the way it is here in Mountain Hollow—finally, the strange things these people do are not strange at all, but ordinary. So I didn't think about it until the very next day, when Miss Amalia popped into the shop.

First Miss Amanda, then Miss Amalia! These two, who had probably not been in town since the death of their father or Miss Amabelle's time in the city,

— whichever came last . . . "Miss Amalia!" I exclaimed. "What are you doing in town?" which seemed to be my daily question. She, too, wore a dotted swiss dress and galoshes over her dotted swiss house slippers.

"I came into town," she said, dropping into the Shaker rocker, "and got the money for Amabelle's check."

"Well, of course," I said. "How is Miss Amabelle?"

"She is fine as angels' wings and happy as a harp song," and there was that expression again.

Miss Amalia looked fragilely flowerlike as always, but I got the impression that day that she was far stronger than she appeared. My impression could have arisen when she said in her prim yet pert way, "Since you paid Amanda for the hooked rug not yet sold, could you please pay me for the hand-painted fruit bowl not yet sold?" ending the request with a smile.

Well, I paid her without argument and she rocked in the Shaker chair, the money from Miss Amabelle's check in one hand and the money from her bowl in the other, until Tommy arrived from Old Man Hardwicke's place to take her home.

It was a strange situation and I

knew it, but here in Mountain Hollow we do not pry into other folks' strange situations, at least not until they become so strange we simply have to—or, at least, until I simply had to, which time occurred a month later.

Spring had advanced dryly, mud ruts turning to dust that seeped in through the window cracks to coat the spool cabinets, baby cradles, carved figurines, and aridly mist the sheets of plastic covering afghans, rugs and bedspreads.

Tommy, shining his jeep engine out in front of the shop, was waiting for Miss Amabelle. This was her day to come into town and pick up her check. I discovered that I, too, was waiting—waiting uneasily, hoping that it would indeed be Miss Amabelle and not one of her sisters—not wishing to reach back into the dark section of my mind to bring forth the suspicion that lay there.

So Tommy shined away happily, and being busy inside the shop, I did not look up until the tinkling sound of the bell on the front door roused me to turn and face Amanda in dusty dotted swiss from neck to toe, carrying the brown window envelope in one hand and the folded flour sack in the other.

Good grief! This was a replay!

She lowered herself decorously into the Shaker rocker and I plumped myself down on a counter and waited for what I knew was sure to come.

Come it did. In a voice as tinkling as the doorbell, Amanda told me how she had picked up the check from Mrs. Milton Kearney, how Mr. Purvis again explained the need for Miss Amabelle's personal endorsement . . . how, therefore, she lacked today's money to pay for this month's supplies, and expected, passively, the amount that would eventually be due her for a consigned bedspread, crewel embroidery tapestry, or whatever . . .

The whole thing was weird!

I thought again of my father's tale of Amanda and the needles and decided right then and there that here was a woman who, while confused, certainly knew the sharp end from the blunt end and which one to use.

"Now, Miss Amanda," I said in head-on confrontation, "why doesn't your sister come in and pick up her check?"

"Because *I* picked it up," she explained. "*She* will put the name on it and bring it back tomorrow."

To indicate the state I was in—also, perhaps my reluctance to think anything was wrong with

this very wrong situation—I paid her for an unsold bedspread, sent her on her way for her supplies and a jeep ride up the mountain without analyzing her obliquely frank answer to my obscurely direct question until that evening when I lifted the plates from flannelette circles, put them up on plate stands for display and draped the exquisitely embroidered luncheon cloth over the counter . . . Then I remembered the words of my question and her reply, and knew, with trembling prognostication, that I would see Miss Amalia the next day, the sister to whom Miss Amanda referred, and not Miss Amabelle, the sister about whom I was asking.

I paced the floor, and when Tommy came in at dark after polishing his engine to eye-stunning brightness, I said, "Sit down, Tommy, I want to have a serious talk with you."

He dropped immediately to the floor and crossed his legs. He becomes a floor-sitter as soon as I say I want to talk to him.

I took the Shaker chair and leaned forward. "Now, Tommy," I said, and wondered where to go from there. "Now, Tommy, do you remember the day you drove your jeep up to the girls' house in order to bring Miss Amabelle to town so she could get her check?"

"Sure, Mom. Golly yes, Mom," his face as placidly empty as a dry stream bed.

"And you got all muddy?"

His forehead wrinkled in an effort to remember.

"You came home late and shined the jeep engine, then I made you take off your shoes at the front doorsill, and your pants out on the back porch . . ."

A glimmer of insulted recall shone in his eyes. "I shouldn't take my pants off outdoors, Mom," he said. "You know that."

"Yes, I know that, Tommy, but it was almost dark and there was no one around and you were very muddy. You were muddy because you had been digging up at Miss Amabelle's. You were digging a garden, you said."

"I was?" he asked.

"You were what?"

"I was digging a garden up at Miss Amabelle's?"

"The ground was wet that day and you came home all muddy. I thought you'd had tire trouble, but you said—"

"I said I had tire trouble." Tommy smiled broadly, remembering his joke—and that was the key! If I could only turn it just right to unlock a misunderstood memory that I might be able to understand . . .

"Well, you certainly were

tired," I said. "You must have done a lot of digging that day."

"Golly, Mom," he said, "the ground was heavy and hard to dig."

"It was Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda who asked you to dig the garden. That's what you said."

"Golly yes, Mom. Miss Amabelle never asked me to dig a garden like that . . ."

I held my breath.

" . . . so deep! Miss Amabelle always said to dig a shovelful deep and that would be just right, but Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda kept saying deeper, go deeper, deep enough to plant the box under the flower garden."

I let out my breath.

Tommy, surprised by what he had suddenly remembered, and rather baffled by the memory, was trying to sort it out. "They had to put the box in first," he said wonderingly, and clapped a hand over his mouth in sudden regretful and total recall.

I said, "They told you not to tell about the box, didn't they, Tommy?"

He parted his fingers in order to say, "I didn't mean to, Mom. They said the box was a secret. The flowers are growing now. Just like Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda said they would."

"I am sure they are, Tommy.

But about the box under the flowers. How big was the box? Can you remember?"

He looked around for an associative size and did not find it. He rocked on the floor, his arms wound around his knees; then, suddenly, he stretched out and, looking with surprise at his length, said, "Golly, Mom, about as big as me."

I sighed.

"And heavy." He blew out his breath, remembering the heaviness.

"You dug a deep garden—a hole—a trench really," I said carefully, "and then, after that, you put the box in the trench—but before that, where was the box?"

I had lost him. Too many before and afters—and it had all happened too long ago. "You sang . . ." I tried to recapture him.

"Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda sang a lot," he said. "I only sang some because I was tired."

"Where was Miss Amabelle?" I asked, but now I knew for sure where she was.

"Miss Amabelle was plumb wore out. She was asleep," he said.

I smiled in agreement. "Feeling fine as angels' wings and happy as a harp song."

Tommy's face brightened. "Golly yes, Mom. That's what

they said. They said Miss Amabelle was flyin' and makin' music, and I said how could she when she was asleep, and they said she could, and I covered the box with dirt and Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda each took a handful of it and dropped it over the place I'd dug and covered up, and then they sang some more and I sang with them except I didn't know the words."

"That's all right, Tommy." I leaned close and patted his shoulder. "A lot of us don't know the words to other people's songs."

There was only one thing left to do and I did it. First, I ordered Tommy into the kitchen. "I have a roast in the oven," I told him, "for supper. What I want you to do is go in there and watch it. Pull a chair up before the oven and keep an eye on the little glass window and watch the roast cook. I'll be in soon and take it out and then we'll eat. Do you understand?"

He nodded, unfolded himself from the floor and splayfooted to the kitchen where I knew he would watch that roast through the glass window, with undivided attention until I told him he could desist.

Then I phoned the sheriff.

He answered immediately. I think he lives there in his county

office on his swivel chair, killing flies and hoping, with each ring of the phone, that it will be a simple call, one that won't keep him away from his swivel chair too long.

He remembered me from when I managed to get him off his duff long enough to watch Tommy solve a patchwork-quilt case he didn't even know he had. "Mrs. Flagg," he said, alerted from his slow drawl, "Tommy's mother," and I could visualize him picking up a pencil stub to take notes. "Well, Mrs. Flagg . . ." after I explained that Miss Amabelle was dead; and "Mrs. Flagg!" when I said I knew she was dead because she had been buried—and I certainly knew she had been buried because Tommy buried her. "Mrs. Flagg!" he yelled through the phone just before I informed him, with dignity, that of course Tommy didn't know he had buried Miss Amabelle; he thought he had buried a heavy box.

However, it was Miss Amabelle all right, I continued, because they'd had a funeral service, including the singing of hymns.

"Mrs. Flagg!" yelled the sheriff who, being a sheriff, was sure that this was a case of murder, and was scared to death of it.

"Murder?" I exclaimed. "Miss Amabelle probably fell off the

roof and broke her neck normally, or her heart gave out while she was gardening—"

"But, Mrs. Flagg . . ." interrupted the sheriff, and I explained that the reason for the secret burial was undoubtedly Miss Amabelle's Social Security checks, which the sheriff understood with relief. Then I had to inform him that forgery being a criminal offense, and using a deceased sister's Social Security checks being a Federal offense, he'd better get out of that swivel chair bright and early in the morning so he could catch Miss Amalia before she got that check cashed, and dig up the grave to find out for sure that Miss Amabelle had died of a broken neck or a heart attack.

"Yes, Mrs. Flagg," he answered, and I went into the kitchen to take the roast from the oven.

My father may have been right when he said that Miss Amalia and Miss Amanda were both half-baked—but they were still smart enough to know they'd better keep Miss Amabelle alive when they found her broken and dead under the eaves of the roof.

They must have talked it over and weepingly made their plans, having an awful time getting that big old feedbox out of the rickety hayloft—two fragile flowers like

that must have had a struggle!

They must have rejoiced when Tommy came roaring up in his jeep. Here was a digger to move mud they couldn't budge in order to bury an accidentally dead sister that they must keep alive in order to use her Social Security checks.

Also, they must have labored long over Amabelle's signature when they discovered they had to write it on the check—not to make the signature authentic (that wouldn't enter their minds)—but only to write the letters in correct sequence, which is probably all that Mr. Purvis of the General Store would require too.

If those sisters were half-baked, they were still cooking with all they had!

They couldn't understand why dear Amabelle had to be dug up and carted off to the county coroner for autopsy when they had buried her so respectfully with hymn-singing and all. Nor could they understand why it was that the Social Security money was so rudely whisked away from them after all their arduous plodding of

the mountain roads and all their careful writing of a name.

Those two! They had no idea what the sheriff and I went through to keep them law-abiding citizens—or rather, to make them law-abiding citizens—by reimbursing the Government for an “incorrectly endorsed” Social Security check and notifying the Social Security Office of Miss Amabelle's demise so there wouldn't be any more checks to be “incorrectly endorsed.”

Those two, so innocently guilty, understood only that I was the one to upset their applecart—I and my prying ways! From that time on, they dealt not with me but through Tommy. Tommy takes their supplies to them. Tommy brings in their beautiful china and lovely Victorian stitchery, and Tommy takes their money to them when I sell what they produce, and I sell it all.

Tommy still thinks Miss Amabelle is sleeping. “As fine as angels' wings,” he tells me, “happy as a harp song . . .” And maybe that's the way it is.



It has been said that one may prefer an accommodating vice to an obstinate virtue.

An Ear for the Language



Around noon of a gusty November day in the last month of Ben York's deanship of City University Law School, Loren wandered into the faculty lounge, the page proofs of the criminal-procedure casebook he was co-editing tucked under his arm. The old dean was stretched out on the brown davenport, nearly asleep, his jacket and trousers in wrinkled disarray, his pipe smoldering on the low table in front of the couch.

As Loren tiptoed past, hoping not to disturb the dean, York suddenly threw a question at the newest member of the faculty.

"What's the worst kind of courtroom evidence?" he demanded in a nasal whine.

"Eyewitness identification," Loren replied automatically, turning to face the davenport.

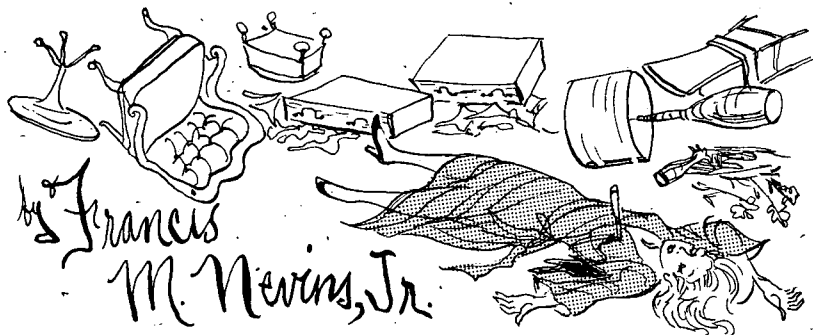
With his eyes still shut, York groped for his pipe and made a motion as if to throw it at the young instructor. "You'll never get tenure around here with ideas like that," he wheezed, and struggled to a sitting position. Loren knew he was in for another story of York's career as a firebrand criminal lawyer.

The old dean hunched forward,

chin buried between gnarled fists. "Back in 1938 it was," he began, "when I still had a few hairs that weren't white. Things were going a little slow at the office, and then one morning who should call for an appointment but John Burnham Craven himself, who was one of the biggest advertising men in the city, back before the war. Head of the Craven & Ward Agency. A big man, six-three,

name of Janice Commings. Then Mrs. Ward found out. Her name was Hilde Elisabeth Ward; she was the daughter of a rich manufacturer over in Germany who got out when Hitler got in. She had money of her own, which was probably why Ward married her. She also had a tiger's temper and a tongue to match."

The dean filled his pipe and lit up. Loren edged away as best he



hundred-ninety pounds, and his hair was starting to get distinguished gray around the edges. I figured I knew what he wanted. The tabs had splashed it up bloody enough two days before when his partner's wife was found with a carving knife in her.

"I expect you don't remember the case," York cut off Loren's attempt to interrupt him, "but it was a pretty rotten little mess. Craven's partner, Duncan Ward, had started playing around with his secretary, a gold digger by the

could to avoid the coming stench. "Well, as I say," York resumed, "Ward's wife found out. And about the same time Janice Commings told Ward she was pregnant and said Ward would have to divorce Hilde Elisabeth and marry her. Then Hilde found out about this development too, by an anonymous letter. We never did find out who sent it, but it must have been one of the other girls at the agency. Any women around here?" He peered into the corners of the faculty lounge as if a fe-

male might be lurking in a shadow. "Good. Then I can say it. You wouldn't believe how some of these girls can hate each other's guts. Don't tell the Equal Employment people I said that, heh-heh.

"Well, anyway, the night before the murder Duncan Ward had a battle royal with his wife. Hilde had said—at least this is what Ward told the D.A. she'd said—she was going to see Janice Commings the next evening and bring the whole mess out into the open if she had to. The Wards had three servants, and they all said they'd heard her shouting the same thing. The D.A. finally pinned them down to agreeing on the exact words: *Janice Commings here tomorrow night then will settle this once and for all.*' Garbled German word order, y'see, ladies and gents of the jury, and that shows the witnesses are telling the exact truth, blah-blah-blah.

"But I'm getting ahead of myself, ain't I? This is still before the murder.

"Hilde gave the servants off the next evening, and the morning after her talk with Janice was to take place, the maid came into the Wards' apartment and found the lights on and the furniture overturned and Hilde Elisabeth with the carving knife from the

dining room sideboard in her heart. After the cops finished grilling Ward and the servants, they arrested Janice Commings. Ward had an airtight alibi, he'd been drinking and playing poker with some cronies and hadn't gotten home till after the cops had arrived.

"They arrested Janice, and J.B. Craven retained me to represent her. I went down to the city jail to see her. She said she'd never had any appointment with Hilde Ward and that she'd never even talked to her on the phone. She said Duncan Ward hadn't mentioned a word to her about Hilde wanting to see her that night. The trouble was, she had no alibi that would stand up.

"Well, I took the case—couldn't afford not to with the retainer J.B. was offering—and we did the usual sparring with preliminary motions, and eventually we went to trial. I figured I wasn't too bad off, because the cops couldn't find any of her prints in the Ward apartment. The D.A. could prove Janice had a motive to kill Mrs. Ward, and that she didn't have an alibi, and he had the statements of the widower and the servants about Mrs. Ward's shouting Janice was coming to see her the next evening.

"Now I ask you again, what is

the worst kind of evidence, the kind that's more subject to human error than anything else?" The old dean leaned back in the corner of the davenport and waited for the answer.

"Eyewitness identification?" Loren's reply was not a statement, as it had been the first time, but a puzzled suggestion. He wondered what the dean was implying.

"Wrong. Earwitness identification," Ben York said. "It took me two days in trial to figure out what happened, but once I worked it out, son, I tell you I made that courtroom hum. I got old Judge Egbert Slaughter so excited his specs fell onto the bench and he broke 'em with his gavel, rapping for order in the court. Y'see, I asked to have the servants recalled to the stand. And I asked 'em just one question apiece. I asked whether the words they'd heard Hilde Elisabeth Ward shout couldn't have been *John is coming here tomorrow night; then we'll settle this once and for all.*"

"John?"

"John Burnham Craven," the old dean said.

Loren half-closed his eyes, beginning to see what was happening.

"Y'see," York went on, "I took a good long look at what everyone swore Hilde had shouted to

Duncan Ward: 'Janice Commings here tomorrow night then will settle this once and for all.' Now that ain't German word order, son, no matter what the D.A. says. Germans don't put all those words between their subject and their verb. I know; I've got an ear for the language. But that's just the sort of thing someone who never learned the lingo might expect a German to do. Later on we found out that the D.A. had asked the servants so many questions about Janice Commings he sort of hypnotized them into believing Hilde had been talking about her.

"Well, I tried to figure out what she might actually have said. And then I got to wondering why Craven had been so anxious to hire the best trial lawyer in the city—that's me, son—to defend the woman charged with killing his partner's wife. That didn't make too much sense.

"Yes, sir, it seems that all the time Duncan Ward was stepping out with Janice, his wife was stepping out with Craven. And Craven did have a date with Hilde at the Ward apartment that night. She told him she knew Janice was pregnant and that now she could get a quick and easy divorce from Ward on grounds of adultery and then Craven could marry her like he'd promised. Well, Craven saw

what a mess like that could do to the advertising agency, and said he would like hell marry her. He even told her she couldn't divorce Ward. He was going to pay off Janice and get her out of the state to avoid a big scandal. Sex was still a scandalous subject back in those days. Well, Hilde lost that tiger temper of hers and grabbed a knife from the sideboard. Craven said he'd accidentally stabbed her in the struggle.

"Duncan Ward had known about Hilde and Craven for months. He stayed away from home that night so the two of them would have a clear field to plan a discreet divorce for Hilde. Of course he had no idea she'd wind up dead, but after it happened he figured he could blackmail Craven for life when it all blew over. He also wanted Janice Commings out of the way. Once he realized that the D.A. had hypnotized the servants into believing it was Janice who had the meeting with his wife, he just went right along with their story." The old man rubbed his veiny hands

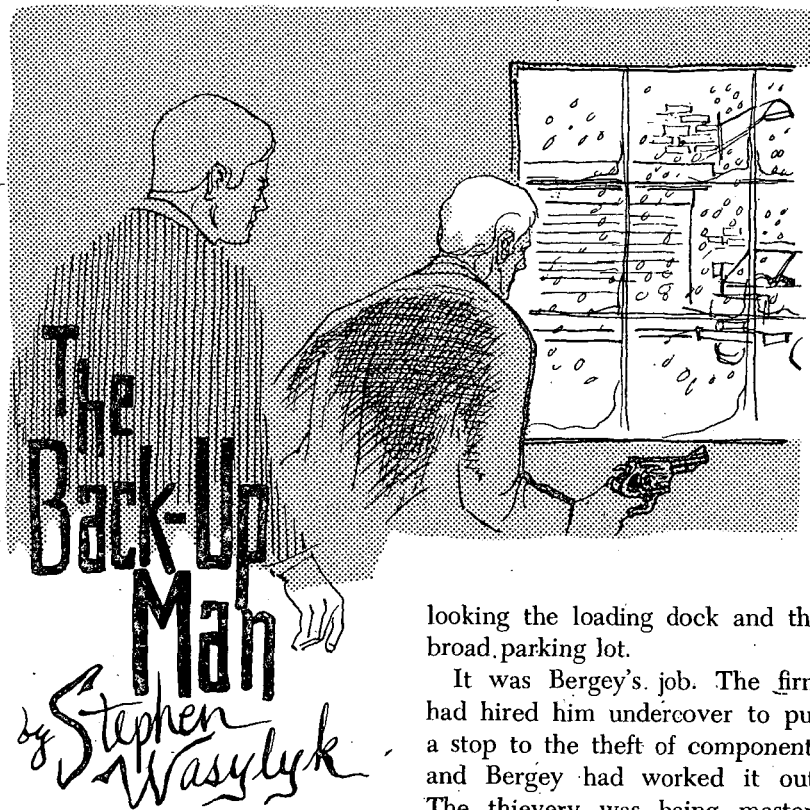
together. "Earwitnesses. Never trust 'em, son.

"The terrible part of the whole thing, though, is that there was no real reason for it to happen. Janice Commings wasn't pregnant at all, y'see. She was just tired of waiting. She thought that if she told him she was pregnant she'd get either marriage or money out of him. Instead, she almost got herself executed. Would have, if I hadn't saved her . . ." His voice trailed off as if he were drifting back to sleep.

Loren said nothing. He had spent the morning proofreading the galleys of his criminal-procedure casebook, which happened to include the case of *Commings v. State*. The defendant had been convicted of murdering the wife of her employer and lover, and after the usual cycle of appeals she had been executed. The opinion of the appellate court had settled some fine points on the law of criminal procedure. Loren left the lounge silently so that the old man could rework more of his memories.



In assessing a case, perhaps even the principals themselves might argue the relative importance of each contributory factor.



We were on stake-out, Wilson Bergey and I, sitting in a darkened shipping office at the rear of a suburban electronics firm, over-

looking the loading dock and the broad parking lot.

It was Bergey's job. The firm had hired him undercover to put a stop to the theft of components and Bergey had worked it out. The thievery was being masterminded from the inside, the head of the shipping department in on it, but Bergey needed solid proof. He wanted to step into the middle of the operation he felt was com-

ing down soon, so we had spent the last three nights staked out in the office, without any action.

I didn't know all the details. I didn't need them. It was enough that Bergey had hired me to back him up and I was happy to have the extra income since my own one-man agency wasn't doing too well.

It had started to snow shortly after dark and the night outside was cold and wet. *Not tonight, either*, I thought. *The snow is getting too deep.*

I glanced at Bergey, a dim shape in the light filtering in from one of the overheads outside the building. He was the kind of private detective I hoped to be someday, running a successful one-man operation because he liked it that way, with a solid reputation and a good list of clients. He was, among the people who knew, almost a legend in his own time, in his late fifties, still straight and hard as a rock and he could hold his own with any of us in spite of his seamed face and white hair.

Neither of us said much during the wait, the silence in the room comfortable, the Thermos jug of coffee we had brought empty long ago, but during the last few minutes Bergey had appeared to be restless, fidgeting in his chair, and I had the feeling something was

on his mind, wearing him down.

He straightened suddenly and walked to the window beside me, peering out at the falling snow.

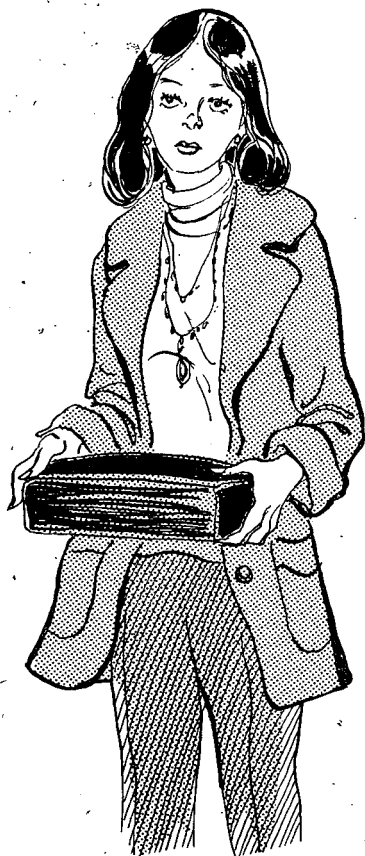
"Listen, Colt," he said, "do you think there are times that a private detective can compromise his integrity?"

"What does that mean? You want to make a deal with this crew when it hits?"

He chuckled. "Nothing like that. I was thinking more along the lines of how much of an obligation a private detective has to his client. Is the client entitled to all the information you turn up, since he's paying for it, even though it may make him very unhappy?"

"That's understood," I said. "An investigator can't pick and choose the information that will make the client leap for joy. It's all a gamble. If the client doesn't want to take it, he shouldn't hire the investigator in the first place. What brought on this little bit of philosophizing?"

He stared out at the snow for a long moment before sighing. "It's just that I was sitting here thinking of a case I handled about ten years ago. I never knew if I handled it right. It's the snow, I guess. I suppose it reminded me of it because it was snowing the day she came to my office."



“Who came to your office?”

“A small girl, with dark hair and one of those innocent, heart-shaped faces that always looks like it just turned sixteen, although I guessed her to be in her middle twenties. Her clothes were expensive but she didn’t wear them well and she impressed me as being the high-strung, nervous type the way she kept fidgeting

around. You know what I mean. You get the feeling that life is a little too much for them and you hope that nothing turns up that they can’t handle because you know they’ll break apart.”

“I haven’t had that much experience,” I said. “I spent eight years on the force but only the last three as a private cop and the clients I’ve had always seem sure of themselves, especially when it comes to discussing money. What did she have on her mind?”

“She carried a box with her,” he said. “I guess the box was about fourteen inches long, four inches high and about five inches wide although I never did get around to measuring it. To me, the thing looked like a miniature coffin, so ugly I couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to keep it longer than it took to get rid of it. She placed the box on my desk and said: ‘I saw your ad in the phone book, Mr. Bergey, and I decided you were the man for me.’”

“I didn’t know what she meant at first and then it came to me. There was quite a large listing of private operatives in the yellow pages and just to be different, I had the words, *I like challenges*, placed beneath my name. I don’t know if it ever brought anyone to the office except her but I guess that doesn’t matter. I asked her

what she had in mind. She looked me in the eye and said, 'I want you to open the box.'"

I found a chair in the darkness and leaned back. It was after midnight and Bergey's story promised to keep me awake. "That is hardly an assignment for a private detective."

"I told her the same thing. In fact, I told her it was a job for a locksmith, not someone like me. She had tried several, she said, but none had any success. Each had suggested she cut it open but she wouldn't hear of that."

"Nevertheless," I said, "I think she had come to the wrong place."

Bergey turned from the window, his face deep in shadow. "Well, maybe, but I decided it would do no harm to talk to her so I asked her where she got the box. It seemed that her aunt had died recently and suddenly. The woman had been found on the livingroom floor before the fireplace with the box in her hands. Even though the girl had lived with her aunt all her life and had grown up in the house, she had never seen the box before, which she didn't consider odd, because her aunt was a very private person and something of a recluse. In fact, the girl, even when she was very young, was never admitted

to her aunt's bedroom, she said."

Bergey had turned again, looking out of the window as if the falling snow were a magic screen on which he could see the past.

"I asked her about her parents. She told me her father had died before she was born and her mother shortly afterward. Her aunt, who never married and whose name was Rene Danton, was not really an aunt but a friend of the mother who had taken the responsibility of raising her. She was the only mother the girl had ever known. The girl was really shaken by her death and still hadn't gotten over it. I had the feeling that she would never get over it. Naturally, the aunt had left everything to her and that included the box. The trouble was, the girl couldn't open the thing. Neither could anyone she had taken it to."

The wind whirled the snow outside, making little whispering noises against the glass while a heater fan whirred somewhere, sending a warm gust of air across the room.

I loosened my collar and shifted to a more comfortable position on the hard chair. "Still, I don't see that it was a problem for a private detective," I said. "There are plenty of people in town who might have been able to help.

Locksmiths, antique dealers, someone from one of the museums.”

“True enough, but puzzles always intrigued me. I picked up the box and looked it over. It was made of a kind of dark wood and it was difficult to tell where the top ended and the base began. There was absolutely no clue as to how it could be opened. There was no lock, no keyhole, no hasp, no hinge. I shook it and heard something shift inside. The more I played with it, the more hooked I became. After all, there *had* to be a way to open it. The way I looked at it, the man who put it together just couldn’t be smarter than I was.”

I laughed. “I always suspected you had a big ego.”

His voice was irritated. “Laugh if you want to. I was there. You were not. If someone handed it to you, you probably couldn’t turn the challenge down either. After all, we’re in business to solve problems, aren’t we? Suppose you had decided to help her. What would you have done?”

I considered the problem. “Why bother opening it at all? Just X-ray the thing. That should tell you what was inside. If it was something valuable, it would pay to break it open.”

“I had somewhat the same thought,” Bergey said. “I told the

girl I would try, and to come back the next day. She gave me a retainer of a hundred and said she’d pay another note if I opened the box. Then I called a friend in the industrial X-ray field and explained the problem to him. He told me that while the idea was worth trying, he didn’t promise much success.”

“Why?” I asked. “It seems to me they X-ray about everything these days—antiques, paintings, metal, wood, rubber. You name it and someone has tried it.”

“Ah,” Bergey said, “that was true even ten years ago, but you must understand the nature of radiography. You are concerned primarily with shapes that appear as shadows in a field of varying contrasts. To read an X-ray film, you have to be dealing with a known subject or a deviation of that subject so that you will have a point of comparison. Otherwise, you will be faced by many unidentifiable shadows, depending on the opacity of the subject material. What I mean is, if there was jewelry in the box, you could probably identify the shapes, but if there were papers there, you would be in trouble. I took the box to my friend and he made three exposures; one from the top, the front and the side.”

“From the tone of your voice,

you weren't successful," I said.

Bergey moved from the window to the chair and I left mine to take his place.

"Wrong," he said. "While we could determine nothing from the contents except for one object that looked like a ring, we lucked out on something else. The X ray showed what was holding the box closed. There were four pins holding the lid in place. They were evidently metal, about an eighth of an inch thick and about an inch and a half long, spaced about two inches in from the corners along the front and back of the box. I took the films back to my office, taped them to the window, dug out my magnifying glass and studied the pins. The side view gave me the clue I needed. I put the box down on my desk, spanned my hands across the top and squeezed with my fingers and thumbs while lifting. It worked. The box gave a little click and the lid came off. It was rigged the way I had figured. The pins were imbedded in the lid and fitted into corresponding holes in the base. Each pin had a small notch that engaged a metal catch in the hole. It was very clever. I had never seen anything like it then or since. Whoever the craftsman was, he must have made only that one."

A car's headlights flashed across

the parking lot and it moved slowly toward the building, leaving deep ruts in the snow. I tensed. Bergey saw the flash of light and quickly joined me at the window. The car kept moving, past the loading dock and toward the far end of the lot where it turned and came back, as if the two occupants were casing the rear of the building. My palms felt wet. The car hesitated, then accelerated and moved out of sight. I wiggled my fingers to relieve the tension.

"The box," I said. "What was in it?"

Bergey went back to his chair. "Four things. The biggest was a diary. The date on the flyleaf was 1939 and the name written there was Rene Danton. The object we thought was a ring was really a ring, a man's gold band with a large diamond. Along with the ring were three pieces of what looked to be dried bone, each a different length. Folded up on the bottom of the box was an admissions record from a hospital in Atlanta, Georgia dated July, 1940. The record indicated a Mrs. Rowena Duke had given birth to a baby girl. I spread the items out on my desk and studied them. It took me a few minutes to realize that the ring and the bones belonged together and that what I

was looking at was the first, second and third phalanges of a human finger that had been severed from a hand."

"Now that's a little on the weird side," I said. "Why would anyone want to save the bones of a finger?"

"I hoped the diary could tell me that. As I flipped the first few pages, a couple of yellowed newspaper clippings fell out. One was rather short, like a late-breaking item in a morning newspaper. It said only that a man named Milo Tanner had been found stabbed to death in his apartment that morning, the ring finger severed from his left hand. The other clipping gave a few more details but nothing very important. The police had no clues and no suspects and were questioning the dead man's acquaintances."

"So it had to be his finger in that box," I said.

"There wasn't a doubt in my mind," Bergey said. "The question was, how did it get there? I figured the diary just might tell me something so I settled back to read. Lucky for me, Rene Danton must have won prizes for penmanship when she went to school because I had no trouble. The first part of the book was the usual girlish prattle about parties and picnics and the men she had met,

mostly the men. It was in July, I think, that she first mentioned the name Milo and from then on it was nothing but Milo. Rene Danton hadn't been shy about using very graphic language for a young woman. She pulled no punches in describing her love affair, to the point where she had me occasionally feeling like a Peeping Tom."

"I know the feeling," I said. "I get it sometimes in going through someone's personal papers."

"You never read anything like this," said Bergey. "Even today, it would carry an X-rating. I waded through the pages pretty quickly until I came to one in October. Rene Danton had discovered she was pregnant. The first pages after that were rather bright and happy, talking about getting married and settling down with this man Milo. It didn't take too long for that to change because while she wanted to get married, Milo didn't. By November, you could sense that she was getting desperate and then I hit the page that stopped me cold. I can still remember the words. *I killed Milo tonight; she wrote. I went to his apartment and begged him to marry me but he simply laughed and told me not to bother him anymore. I had a long knife in my purse that I had bought to use on myself if he refused but I saw*

that he was the one who should die, not me, so I pulled it out and stabbed him while he was laughing. I stabbed and stabbed until he was dead on the floor and then I saw the ring I had given him and I didn't want him to have it anymore. I tried to pull it off but it was too tight so I cut his finger off."

Bergey's voice trailed off and we sat quietly, each with his own thoughts. I could visualize the desperate young woman's arm flailing up and down with that knife and then her concentration as she hacked away at the dead man's finger. Six months, I mused, for love to turn to hate.

"Hey," I said softly, "she couldn't have been wrapped too tight right then."

"I don't suppose she was," Bergey said. "To keep the box and what was in it, she never did get back to normal."

"It must have all been rather bloody."

"She spoke of that in the diary," Bergey said. "She described how she used his bathroom to wash her hands and to clean the knife and the finger. She wrapped those in a handkerchief, put them in her purse and walked out."

I couldn't believe it had been that simple but I knew it hap-

pened that way sometimes. "And she was never caught?"

"She worried about that for a long time," Bergey said. "The police came and questioned her because she was known as one of Milo's girlfriends but she told them she hadn't been out that night at all. I didn't know if they believed her or not but no one must have seen her and they had no other evidence. They may have had their suspicions but did nothing about them because she mentioned the matter in the diary only once more. She described having the box made and putting the knife and finger inside. A reminder, she said, that as long as she lived she would never again trust another man."

"That was the end of the diary?"

"Except for the last page there was nothing else except her growing concern about having an illegitimate child. That really bothered her. She wasn't concerned only with her own reputation. She wanted that child to have a name. Toward the end of December, she wrote of going somewhere to have the baby under a different name."

"Rowena Duke and Atlanta, Georgia," I said.

"That was my conclusion. She raised the girl as her niece, making up a story about the parents

dying. I didn't know how she backed it up but it must have been good because there was no doubt in the girl's mind that it had happened the way her so-called aunt had told her. I don't know why she chose such a complicated masquerade but people under stress do strange things. Perhaps she thought that if she were picked up for the murder of Milo Tanner, it would not reflect on the child."

"As I said before," I repeated, "she couldn't have been wrapped too tight. She could have just moved away, changed her name, said her husband was dead and that would have been enough."

"There was no point to guessing," Bergey said. "She couldn't explain because she was dead and there was no way to go back twenty-five years and untangle it all. I figured it wasn't important anyway. What was important was, what was I going to tell the girl?"

The tone of the question in the semidarkness struck me as strange. Bergey didn't seem to be merely passing time, presenting it as a test, as a problem for me to solve; but rather as an appeal, looking for an answer from me to something that had occurred and been handled ten years before.

"Hell," I said, "I don't see where you had a big problem. She

wanted the box open. You opened it. You were not responsible for what was inside."

"It wasn't that simple," he said quietly. "What was inside that box showed her so-called aunt was really her mother and that she had killed the man who had been her father. There are many human beings who would find that bit of knowledge difficult to live with and I had the feeling the girl was one of them. Her mother had kept it from her for twenty-five years. You remember that she had died suddenly and they found her body in front of the fireplace. I would have bet that she sensed what was happening and tried to burn the box before she died. I knew one thing: the murder may have tilted the mother's mind slightly out of kilter but I'm sure she never would have wanted her daughter to read that diary. Did I have the right to turn it over to her?"

"You not only had the right, you had the obligation. That was what she had hired you for."

"Maybe," said Bergey. "I thought about it all night."

"You really didn't have very many options open to you," I said. "You could return the retainer and tell her you couldn't open the box, knowing that someone else would open it and the girl would know then. All you

would be doing would be postponing the inevitable and shifting the responsibility to someone else. I would figure she had to know sometime. You might as well tell her yourself. Did you?"

Bergey had no time to answer. Another pair of headlights flashed across the snow, headed toward the rear of the firm. We, both moved to the window to see a white pickup van feeling its way through the snow and headed directly toward us.

"Here we go," Bergey said quietly. "Let them get started before we move in."

The van swung in an arc, then backed up to the loading dock. Two men, dark against the snow, left the van and climbed the platform. After a time, we heard the sound of the overhead door being raised cautiously.

"I told them to hire a night watchman," whispered Bergey. "They wouldn't listen. I told them to put in an electronic alarm system. 'No time,' they said. 'You handle it.'" He placed a hand on my shoulder. "Okay, we'll handle it as soon as they begin loading. You let me move first, no matter what happens."

We crept out of the office into the shipping room, stepping into a sea of cold air pouring through the open door. The two men, us-

ing flashlights, were moving cartons from the shipping room to the loading dock, working swiftly, one urging the other to hurry.

"Now!" Bergey said. He hit the light switch.

The men spun, blinking in the sudden glare.

"Freeze!" yelled Bergey, standing up, his old police special pointed and ready.

One man straightened, his hands raised. The other dived behind a carton, reappeared with a gun in his hand and fired.

Beside me, Bergey gasped and staggered backward. I had time to wonder only fleetingly why he hadn't fired first because the man behind the carton was swinging the gun in my direction. I squeezed off my magnum, the slug knocking him off his feet and sliding him across the snow on the shipping dock.

The other man still stood, hands up, eyes wide and frightened, his face pale.

"Put your hands on your head and get down on the floor," I barked as I ran past him. He obeyed.

I checked the man on the platform. He wasn't dead yet but he was in no shape to cause any more trouble. I kicked his gun away from him and ran to the phone, dialing the special police

number and asking for a car and an ambulance. Then I ran to Bergey.

He had propped himself up against a carton, holding a hand over a spreading stain on his stomach. I didn't like what I saw.

"Hell," he said quietly.

"Don't talk," I said. "The ambulance will be here soon."

"Maybe not in time."

"Just take it easy," I told him.

Neither of us said anything for a few moments, the only sounds were Bergey's harsh breathing and the whisper of snow sifting through the open door.

"Listen," he said softly. "About the girl, Kera Duke."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"Sure it matters," he said. "Everything always matters. I finally told myself that anything that happened if she really knew what was inside the box wasn't my responsibility. I had my integrity to consider so all I cared about was doing the job, no matter who got hurt. I opened that damned box for her and turned it over to her intact."

The man on the platform was still now, the other unmoving, his hands still on his head. I slipped out of my coat and draped it over Bergey.

"All right," I said. "What did she say?"

"Nothing much at the time. She seemed to take it well. A little stunned but able to handle it."

"What do you mean, at the time?"

Bergey shifted and coughed a little. "She killed herself six months later."

"That wasn't your fault."

His eyes rolled to me. "Wasn't it?"

Sirens were sounding now, getting closer. Bergey's face was tortured, the pain showing in his eyes, and I wasn't sure if it was from the wound or the memory.

"It will only be a few minutes more," I said.

"I killed her," he said, "as surely as her mother killed her father. Using a knife or a gun isn't the only way."

"Listen," I said, "I don't want you to think like that."

"I wanted someone to know," he said. "It is important for someone to know."

The ambulance pulled up outside along with a police cruiser. A white-coated intern knelt quickly at the body of the man on the platform, left him and came toward us.

Bergey looked up at me, suddenly very old. "Some killings stay with you a long time," he said. "I've been carrying that one for ten years."

"But you had no choice, man."

"You always have a choice," he said. "Why do you think I didn't shoot first tonight?"

I moved away to give the intern room.

I wanted to go with him to the hospital but the two policemen were very firm about making out a report on the spot because two men had been shot and one was already dead, so it was a half hour after the ambulance had gone before one of the patrolmen finally put away his notebook, coughed hoarsely and blew his reddened nose into a big white handkerchief. "Damn weather," he said. "Damn cold. I wish it was July."

July. The word hung between us.

I put a hand on his arm. "What did you say?"

"July," he said. "You know. Warm weather, sunshine, swimming."

Swimming. I clapped him on the back. "I'll check with you later at headquarters."

It all came back as I sprinted through the snow to my car and I wondered why it had taken so long. It had been only my second year on the force when my partner and I had seen the girl climb the bridge parapet in the darkness, stand outlined against the July night for a moment, then

dive. We slid to a halt and I had already dropped my hat and gun belt before I vaulted the railing after her.

The water had come up fast, hitting with a shock that drove the breath from my lungs, filling my nose and mouth; foul-tasting and odiferous with some unknown city effluence, oily and slippery.

I searched for the girl, saw her once, barely touched her before the current pulled her away and, in the darkness, I couldn't find her again, treading water helplessly, my head turning, cursing the blackness that was softened only by the glow filtering from the bridge above me and highlighted by the reflections of the lights of the city along the banks.

By the time they brought the searchlights, it was too late.

They found her downstream the next morning.

Her name had been Kera Duke.

The name had never been important to me—until now.

News stories have a way of reporting only the immediate. The report of the girl's death appeared, but not the reasons. Certainly the mandatory autopsy report never saw print, but I saw it several days later.

Kera Duke's autopsy report showed why she had felt it necessary to leap from that bridge. No

matter what Bergey had done with that box, the result would have been the same. Inoperable and terminal was the conclusion the M.E. had made in regard to the cancer.

If Bergey had only followed up the case, he would have known; but for reasons of his own he hadn't done that, and so he had spent ten years haunted by the girl's death and it had finally come close to costing him his own life—maybe already had.

You can't relax for a minute, I reflected. Ease up just a little and life will find a way to slam you down, even the best of us.

I drove dangerously fast in the snow, sliding around corners and plowing through deserted intersections against red traffic lights until the dull, glowing windows of the hospital appeared through the drifting flakes and I skidded into the driveway.

The intern saw me coming down the hall and smiled. "Under control," he said. "He's in the operating room and I think he'll make it."

"Fine," I said. "I'll just wait."
"Listen," he said, "he kept mumbling about some girl. There wasn't a girl there tonight, was there?"

I smiled. "Yeah," I said, "there was."

"I didn't see her."

"You wouldn't," I said. "Not unless you could see a ghost."

"A ghost?" He looked concerned. "Something like that on his mind won't help his recovery."

"Nothing to worry about," I said. "I'll settle it as soon as I can see him." I found a chair and slumped into it, pushing my sodden feet out in front of me.

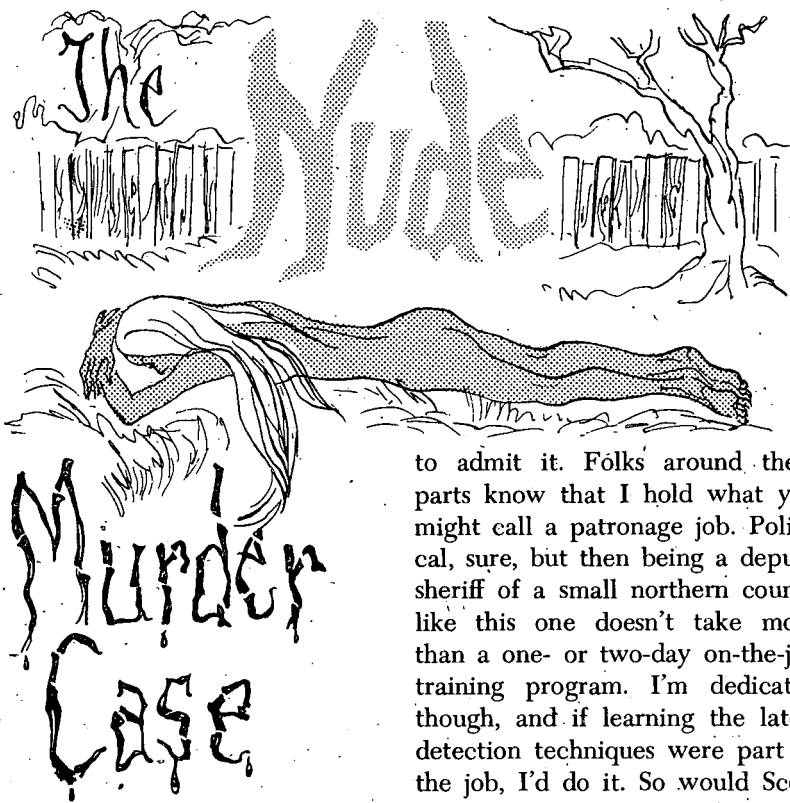
The intern looked at me curiously, obviously with time on his hands and wanting to talk. "Were you in charge out there tonight?"

I closed my eyes, the tiredness deep. The hospital was quiet, the halls deserted, the rooms dark and I hoped I could stay awake. I certainly didn't feel like talking to the intern.

"No," I said wearily. "I'm nobody important. I'm just a back-up man."



As one learns, there really is more to modern detection than meets the eye.



There are some detection techniques you don't learn at police academies, and then maybe you do learn them? I wouldn't know. I never went through any such school. No way. I'm not ashamed

to admit it. Folks around these parts know that I hold what you might call a patronage job. Political, sure, but then being a deputy sheriff of a small northern county like this one doesn't take more than a one- or two-day on-the-job training program. I'm dedicated though, and if learning the latest detection techniques were part of the job, I'd do it. So would Scott Purdy, the other deputy sheriff.

"Rudy," he said to me one day, "you know if we had any real detective work to do in this neck of the woods we'd be lost."

"Sheriff Goodson could always count on the big-city cops and

their lab to do the big work," I answered.

Most of our work is mostly traffic anyway. There are a few road-houses that need a looking into every now and again for rough-housing or for serving drinks later than the law allows. Outside of that, like I said, Scott and I have some pretty soft patronage jobs.

Things do change, though, and so they did with a ringing suddenness. I answered the phone: "Sheriff's office . . ."

"Scott, uh, Scott Purdy—it's important," a masculine voice said in an anxious, almost breathless tone.

"Scott!" I yelled across to the other end of the office. "It's for you over on line two."

Scott picked up the receiver and I walked over to his desk in time to hear him ask, "You're cer-

by Gil Stern

tain she's dead?" There was a pause, a long-enough pause to have my stomach churn over at the word *dead*.

"Okay," Scott said into the phone, "we'll be right out. Don't touch a thing, and round up all the folks on the grounds." Scott said to me as he hung up, "Murder at Sunny Placid Camp."

"Sunny Placid Camp?" A picture came into my mind. "Isn't that the nudist camp?" I put on my gun belt and adjusted my tie. "How come *he* asked for you?"

"Why not?" Scott said as he reached for his gun belt drooped over the hook behind his desk. "I'm a member."

"But you're a married man."

"Well, what do you think a nudist camp is, an orgy park? Most members are married. Of course there are a lot of singles too. Don't get the wrong idea; it's strictly a way of enjoying nature at its fullest."

"But without clothes?" I snickered.

"The human body can be as beautiful as the human spirit," he said.

I reminded him the human spirit isn't so hot—we had a murderer to find.

I could picture Scott at a nudist camp. His muscular body, coordinated like an athlete's, moved as easily as a cat under his custom-tailored uniform that outlined his form perfectly. Now me, I'm a little paunchy here, a bit puffy there, and where Scott Purdy could look better without clothes, I would need my official brown-and-tan uniform to mask the flaws.

I had always known there was a

nudist camp under our jurisdiction and had often passed by the tall shrubbery that ran the length of the gate front, but since there was never any trouble I never stepped inside. Sure, I was curious, but like Sheriff Goodson always remarked, "Don't poke if you don't want to get poked."

"Shucks," I said, "Sheriff Goodson is off on his vacation. Maybe we'd better call in the city boys?"

"Fine thing," Scott answered, "our one murder in who knows how long, in fact our only murder ever, and you're running for help. We haven't even seen what's out there yet."

Confidence I have, but nerve is something else. "What gives you the bright idea that you're a detective?"

"Let's put it this way," he said, "we're all we got, so let's give it all we got."

We called in a few of our troopers and headed for the camp grounds. As we rode I asked Scott for the details he had learned over the phone.

"That was Melton Atwood, the director. He said he heard screams and ran to the edge of the camp grounds, where he found a gal stabbed. Her name is Marjorie Land. One of the members is a doctor and he pronounced her dead. I told Melton not to touch

anything before we arrived—"

"I know," I interrupted, "I heard your end of the conversation."

We approached the shrubbery-protected gate and my anticipation of what was beyond was heightened by the large sign just inside the gate: THE HUMAN BODY CAN BE AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE HUMAN SPIRIT. There was no doubt now that Scott Purdy was a member.

We stopped by the first rustic cabin, which was the office. A man in his early sixties waved at us.

"Melton," Scott called out, "you'd better lead the way."

We got out of our vehicle and walked along with Melton Atwood. "It's awful, Scotty," he said, talking to fellow member Purdy. "First time in our long history we've had any kind of problem."

As we walked I noticed a crowd of people evidently standing near the body. All were clothed. "I thought this was a nudist camp," I said. "How come they're all wearing clothes?"

"That's my doing," Melton answered. "I knew the sheriff would want to question the members so I asked that they all get dressed. You see, we are not exhibitionists. We believe that nudity is a matter

of choice; ours to practice, yours to view it if you wish."

"See, Rudy, no orgy," Scott said. "Now, as for me, I come here on my days off and we sometimes take a week's vacation here—that is, Beverly and the two kids."

"Kids!" I exclaimed.

"Oh yes," Melton went on, "the teens and young people are taking to nudity. I don't mean just skinny-dipping or streaking, but to camps such as this one. Marjorie Land, the girl who was murdered, was nineteen."

"What about this girl?" I asked.

"There's not too much I can give you. She wasn't one of our members. She came from California and we have a reciprocal agreement with the camp she belongs to out there. Our members can visit there at no extra charge and their members here. We have arrangements like that with many such camps. So you see, I can't enlighten you too much."

As we approached, the crowd opened a path for us which led to the body of a deeply tanned, long-haired girl.

"I'm Dr. Gerrard, Officers," a tall gray-haired man said as he stepped forward. He was wearing tennis shorts and shirt and white canvas shoes. "She was stabbed three or four times. Not big

wounds, but slashing wounds, probably caused by a small knife."

"Any knife found?" Scott asked.

"No."

I looked over the crowd of some thirty people, all dressed in sport clothes. "Any more members on the grounds?"

"No," Melton answered. "Our season is just starting. In fact, this is only the second day we've been opened. As the weather gets even warmer we'll have more than three hundred on a good day."

"What now?" I questioned Scott under my breath.

"Let's try and find the murder weapon and at the same time we'll question the members."

That seemed most sensible. It was obvious that whoever murdered the girl was someone who was within the grounds. Nobody had been seen running away and the wooded area was too far off for people not to have seen someone making a dash to the woods.

I noticed several trees nearby. "The murderer could have run behind those trees and then come out in the open and mixed with the others when they came running."

Scott and I retreated back to the camp director's cabin where we set up an interrogation room. The coroner had come and removed the body and the troopers

were scouring through the other cabins and in the camp grounds for the murder knife—all very professional. Sheriff Goodson would be proud of us.

However, as darkness descended we were no closer to discovering the murderer than we had been when we first arrived.

We talked with all thirty people on the grounds and all had similar answers. Did you know Marjorie Land? *Only saw her today.* Where were you when hearing the screams? *At the volleyball court or taking a sunbath.* Where did you go afterward? *Took a shower and got dressed to wait for the police.*

When the last of the thirty to be questioned left the cabin, I turned to Scott and asked, "Well, ready to call in the pros?"

Scott just gazed ahead and then his face brightened. "Listen, we should solve this one because I am a pro; a pro nudist."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

"No," he answered. "I'm serious. Now think. Remember the dead girl and how she looked?"

"Certainly I do, what about it?"

"She had a deep tan, right?"

"All over," I said. "But what's so strange about that? She was a nudist."

"True, but the camp has only been open two days. That means

she got her deep tan elsewhere. According to Melton, the camp director, she wasn't a member but had visiting rights because she belonged to a nudist camp that has reciprocal visiting agreements for their members."

I was still puzzled by Scott's reasoning as he got up and gazed out the window. "Out of the thirty we saw today, how many would you say had deep tans?"

I let my mind replay the interrogations. "Three," I said, "those three hippie-types."

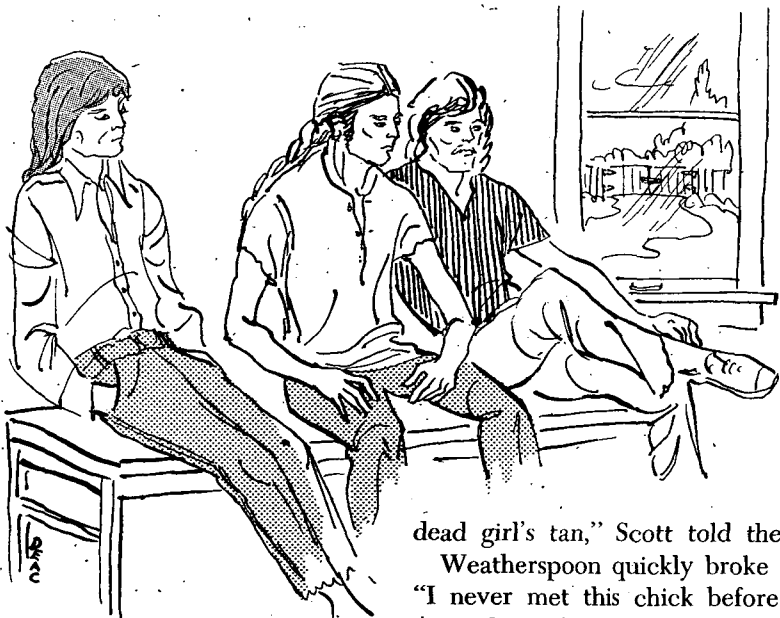
"Right!"

"It figures." I reviewed the logic. "They'd be the most likely, about the same age and all. And with a deep tan like the girl's, it means the murderer must've known the girl before here. Let's face it, we know it wasn't a robbery and murder. A nudist can't be carrying a wallet or anything like that."

"Let's call those three back."

The three, when called, walked into the cabin with a confident swagger and Scott motioned for them to be seated. "Let's see, you're Collins," Scott said to the long-haired youth whose hair was braided in one long Indian-style plait behind his back.

"And you're Weatherspoon, right?" Scott asked of the youth whose sandy hair fell freely below



his shoulders, shading his face.

"And you're Dilman." Scott looked at all three. Then he continued: "We've singled you three out because you're all about or near the same age as the dead girl and what's more, none of you is from around here. You are all here under reciprocal visiting rights. That means one of you, two of you or all three of you knew her from perhaps the other nudist camps she visited?"

Collins spoke up first. "What makes you so sure we visited other camps?"

"Something that gives away a nudist, a deep tan—just like the

dead girl's tan," Scott told them.

Weatherspoon quickly broke in. "I never met this chick before. I came here from some camps in the South. You can check their registers."

"Same here," Dilman said. "We both cycled up this way, stopping at camps along the way. We never saw the girl before."

"That leaves you, Collins," I addressed him. "Which direction did you come from?"

"All right," Collins admitted, "I came from the West and yes, I met Marjorie at one of the camps on the way here, but kill her? You'd have a rough time proving that."

He was right, of course. Scott and I were convinced he was our man, but that's not enough. This

is where good detective work comes in, good interrogation practices.

"Do you own a knife?" Scott asked.

"No," he answered.

Quickly Scott followed up the answer with: "Where were you when she was murdered?"

"I told you before," he answered. "I was lying in the sun, over by the woods. I came running over, just like everyone else."

"Why didn't you tell us before that you knew the girl?"

"'Cause I know how you cops think, just like you're thinking now." He smiled defiantly.

One of our troopers walked in and asked if the men should continue searching for the knife, seeing as it was getting dark? Scott told him to hold off and wait for further instructions. The trooper left and we also excused the other two men. We kept Collins sitting, uncomfortably, but confidently.

"If you're going to hold me, I want a lawyer," he said.

I knew we couldn't hold him on the evidence we had. That much experience I had accumulated in my ten-year tenure. I whispered to Scott, "Let's leave him to the pros."

"You forget, Rudy," he said, "I'm a pro, too." Scott then

walked over to Collins. "You know what we have here, Rudy; we have a man in disguise. He's a nudist and yet we're questioning him with his clothes on. Remove your clothing, Collins."

"Why?" he asked.

"You're a nudist and I want you looking the way you looked while basking in the sun."

Collins removed his clothes quickly. There were many scratches over his chest and shoulders.

"Hey," I said, "those look like scratch marks that the girl could've made while trying to fight you off."

"You're crazy, cop!" Collins shouted. "Every nudist has scratches from walking through bushes and shrubbery."

Scott agreed. "You're right, Collins. However, some of those scratches look pretty recent, with dry blood caked on. Now that gives me some clue as to where the murder weapon, the knife, is."

I was now in awe of Scott's coolness and I could sense Collins becoming quite uneasy.

"I don't know if you realize it, Collins, but I'm a nudist too. So I know a few things the other cops, the plainclothesmen, might overlook."

Collins turned his head away and sweat appeared.

Scott continued, "For instance, why didn't we find a murder weapon? If it was an ordinary knife, the murderer could simply wipe off the prints and throw it away, anywhere. He can't carry it around because there's no place to hold the knife. Now when Melton, the camp director, told the others the police would be here, they took showers and dressed. Judging from those dried scratch marks, I'd guess you didn't take a shower, did you?"

"No, I didn't shower. I didn't think I had to."

"No, you didn't have to—but then I have to wonder what you were doing during the time it takes for a shower? My guess is that you were busy hiding the knife."

Collins moved toward the wall. Scott moved toward him. "Now, where would you hide the knife? Bury it? No, too risky. Throw it down the sewer? Maybe, but there's still the chance of discovery in a search of the grounds."

Scott moved in closer, his big frame holding Collins prisoner. "My guess is that you still have the knife, Collins. Am I right, Collins? Didn't you put it back

where you always keep the knife—in the braid of your hair?"

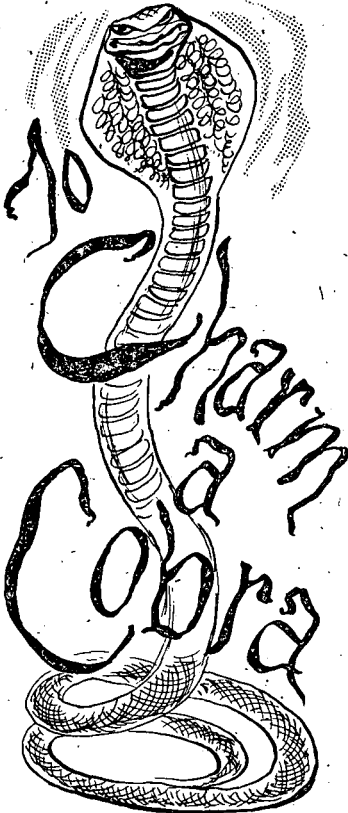
Collins reached for the braid but Scott grabbed his hand and turned him around. A knife plunked to the floor. That wasn't all that spilled; soon Collins told all.

He admitted that Marjorie Land had rebuffed his romantic attentions. He untwined the knife from his braid to frighten her but when she screamed, he panicked and stabbed her several times. Then, as I surmised, he had run behind a nearby tree and then joined the others running toward the screams.

The ironic part is that Collins admitted he was fearful of getting rid of the knife because he had heard stories of how particles of hair can get embedded in an object and, from that, a description of the murderer can be made. Imagine us, two patronage jobholders being that great at detective work, being that sophisticated? If only Collins knew who he was really trying to outsmart.

Like I said, there are some detection techniques you don't learn from police academies; but I don't know about that for sure.

As the rhythmic swaying of the cobra fascinates, so may the professional sense the time to placate and the time to act.



Dr. Nathan Zilian smiled to himself as the plane swung into the landing pattern. LaGuardia glittered below. Its blinking lights reminded him of brain cells making

memory connections. He could not get away from himself, it seemed, or forget his lifelong preoccupation with the workings of the mind, not even when he got away physically from his practice.

He sighed comfortably at the window, misting himself into an all-too-fleeting fog of forgetfulness. Then he fixed on the back of the seat in front of him and tensed against his own seat and seat belt. At the moment of landing, what Zilian felt about flying always overrode whatever Freud might have said about flying. Then they were down safely and he relaxed expectantly.

It was good to get away for a while, have new experiences and make new connections; but it was also good to get home again, touch base with the familiar.

He had nothing to declare and, having only a carry-on bag and an attaché case, cleared customs quickly, but before he could leave the terminal building and find a cab a quiet yet sharp voice stopped him.

"Dr. Zilian?"

It was more statement than question, however, and without waiting for Dr. Zilian to answer, the man, a trim example of the sports-minded young-executive type, eased him out of the flow of travelers. Playing it close to both their chests, the man flipped open a leather folder, flashed a gold badge at him, and flipped the folder shut.

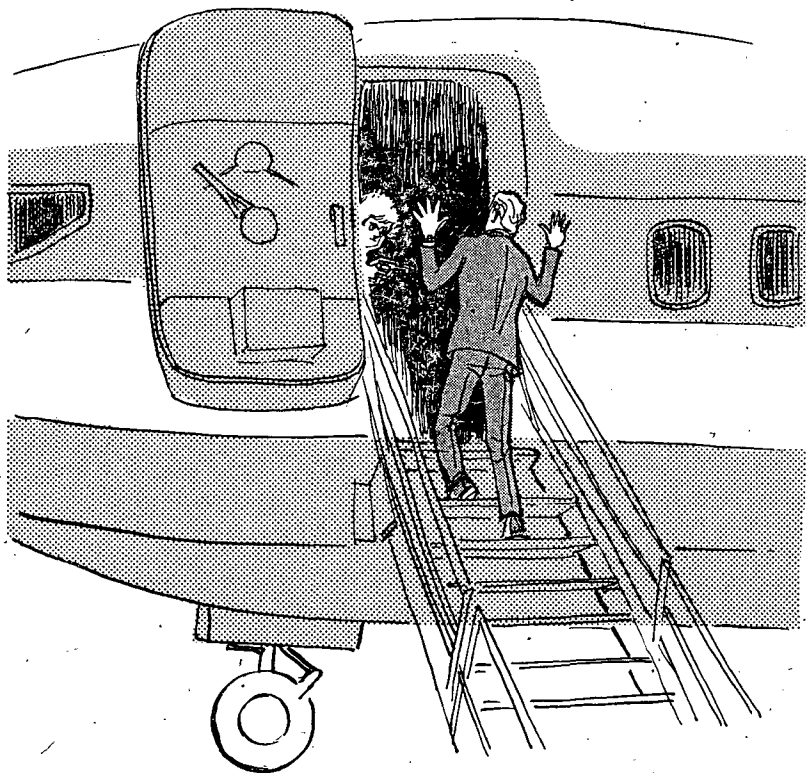
"Virgil Drury."

"Yes, Mr. Drury?"

Dr. Zilian mentally took his own pulse. He told himself it was normal for the nonguilty to feel guilty and to feel that they looked guilty. He felt sure that he looked and sounded cool and pleasant.

"Dr. Zilian, there's an emer-

by Edward
Wellen



gency situation and we need your help."

"Ah?" He told himself it was normal for the expert to savor the respect of laymen for his expertise. Again he relaxed expectantly. Curiosity bumped pride. "How did you know I'd be here? I myself did not know till this morning that the Vienna Psychoanalytic Conference would break up suddenly and that I would pack up and head home a week early."

"To tell the truth, Doctor, we didn't know." Something flashed across Drury's face. It might have been a grimace, it might have been a smile. "Sunday's a bad day for getting hold of one of you guys. We tried phoning a few but only got answering services. So we ran down the names on the incoming and outgoing flight lists on the off-chance of catching someone passing through and lucked into what I understand is the biggest name in the field."

Dr. Zilian bowed slightly. "I see. How may I be of help?"

A hand clamped onto his funny bone and urged him forward.

"If you don't mind, Doctor, I'll explain as we go along. There's a deadline and we don't have much time." Drury looked grim and the hand on Dr. Zilian's elbow communicated tension. "We hope you can help the FBI and the police

deal with a terrorist holding a plane and a pilot hostage."

Drury interrupted himself and reached out his free hand. "Here, Doctor, let me carry your bag."

"It's all right, Mr. Drury."

"It isn't all right. No sense you lugging all that. We want you free to concentrate on the problem." Drury veered the two of them toward a bank of coin lockers. He quartered the carry-on bag and the attaché case and handed Dr. Zilian the key. "On Uncle Sam."

Dr. Zilian pocketed the key but kept his hand on it. It seemed to give him strength, and he needed strength now that he realized fully he would soon come face to face with a real live terrorist.

"This terrorist—"

The hand squeezed his elbow. "Keep it down, Doctor." Drury looked around anxiously as he levered Dr. Zilian along by the elbow. "We don't want the press and the public rubbernecking, getting in the way, clamoring."

"Of course."

Dr. Zilian felt a twinge of let-down. He had been visualizing himself the focus of lenses, the world looking on as he strode to the rescue; a childish fantasy, of course. This was a desperate situation and he needed not an admiring audience but mature wisdom

to deal properly with the situation.

Drury led Dr. Zilian outside and set a stiff pace through overlapping cones of light. Dr. Zilian felt grateful for his almost daily sessions of handball. Even so, he was puffing slightly as they neared a plane standing off by itself on the edge of the blacktop but it was a matter of pride to speak as if he did not need air.

"This terrorist, Mr. Drury. What can you tell me about him?"

Drury was busy signaling by way of a circumscribed but urgent gesture to someone Dr. Zilian couldn't see.

"Sorry, Doctor. I've spotted sharpshooters all around," he nodded toward a hangar roof and a nearby parking lot, "and I have to keep them out of sight and yet ready to shoot the plane's tires or, if we get the right opening, the hijacker himself."

Dr. Zilian dug in his heels against Drury's pull.

"Whatever you do, don't start shooting. Shooting only triggers off more shooting."

"We're hoping it doesn't come to that, Doctor. That's why you're here. But if it does come to that . . ." Drury shrugged.

Dr. Zilian shook his head.

"It should not come to that. The first thing is to overcome the

terrorist's natural suspiciousness. The next thing is to establish a relationship with him. Then one may evaluate the terrorist's mental state. Is he under the influence of, say, speed? Is he fanatical, dedicated, indoctrinated, determined? If so, he will be oblivious to loss of life, including his own. These are the parameters of the situation and I must fill them in. What can you tell me about him? How does he sound?"

"Like a real nut case."

Dr. Zilian frowned at the unscientific diagnosis.

"Has he made any demands?"

"Has he! And what demands! He wants a billion dollars in gold and the release of all imprisoned terrorists, and he's given us a three-hour deadline. See what I mean? A real nut case. We couldn't meet those demands even if we wanted to—and I hardly have to tell you we don't want to."

"We can't tell him we won't meet his demands. We must talk with him and see if we can reason with him." Dr. Zilian wasn't as confident as he hoped he sounded. The impossible demands showed a mind totally out of touch with reality or a mind set on fulfilling a death wish, or both.

Drury shrugged again. "Sure, talk with him and reason with

him. That's just what we're asking you to do. But one thing's sure: when the talking's over he's going to be in custody or dead. Even if he could get off the ground with it—and at \$200 an ounce that would mean a payload of more than 156 tons—he's not leaving the field with any billion in gold. You do your job, Doc, and we'll do ours."

Dr. Zilian spoke coldly. "I'm thinking of the pilot he's holding hostage." He was also thinking of Drury's forwardness in calling him "Doc."

Drury nodded. "Yeah, there's that." He stepped up the tempo and stepped down the volume as they neared the plane. "Couple of things you have to know, Doc. We got a make on the young guy who's pulling this—a punk, a born loser, name of Robbie Hanna. The pilot he's holding hostage is named Joe Conger. And you're plain Mr. Zilian from the FAA."

Dr. Zilian nodded approvingly, though the loss of his hard-won doctorate made him feel naked.

The door of the plane stood open at the head of a flight of mobile stairs.

"Hold it right there."

Drury and Zilian halted at the command from limbo. The man himself was keeping out of the doorway, no doubt for fear FBI

sharpshooters would pick him off; mad but shrewd. Drury put his hands up and elbowed Zilian to do the same.

"Take it easy, Robbie."

"I told you only one at a time can come near." The voice slid down from its pitch of near-hysteria. "Who's that clown with you?"

Dr. Zilian felt his face flame and his lips press tight.

Drury shook his head. "Now, Robbie, this gentleman is Mr. Zilian of the FAA. He has full authority to talk terms with you."

"What is this, a stall? There's no need to talk terms. You know what they are. All you have to do is carry them out."

"Carry you out," but that was a mutter only Dr. Zilian caught. Drury spoke up for Robbie Hanna's ears. "We know, Robbie, but it's a large order—you have to admit that—and you ought to know about the arrangements we're making."

A breathy silence, then, "Okay. But no tricks and no wrong moves. I mean business."

"That we understand, Robbie. We'll do what you say." That was for Robbie Hanna's ears. Drury dropped to a mutter for Dr. Zilian. "One thing I should warn you about, Doc. If we think we can catch him off guard we plan

to rush the plane. We'll try to tip you off a second or two before, so you can get set to throw yourself down out of the line of fire. The signal will be four blasts, two blasts, and three blasts of a car horn. Got that?"

At Zilian's half-nod—4-2-3 was easy enough to keep in mind—Drury wheeled and walked away, leaving Zilian standing alone and holding his hands high and staring at the steps and the dark and empty doorway. There was a stretched-out moment in which Zilian wanted to shout and scream at Drury, a moment in which Zilian wondered if the real madman were Robbie or Drury or himself, but he could not bring his mind to bear on anything but the steps and the dark and empty doorway.

"All right, you. What did he say your name is?"

"It is Zilian. Nathan Zilian."

"Okay, Zilian. You can come up the stairs. Take it slow and keep your hands in sight at all times, understand?"

"Understood."

Zilian took it slow for another reason as well. It was hard to maintain balance on the steps while holding his hands high.

Robbie had doused the interior lights—more evidence of method in madness—and it took Zilian another prolonged moment to get

past the gun and the eyes that caught what light there was. Then he made out a young face with a permanent frown. He put on a smile that faded as Robbie turned him around roughly and patted him down.

"Okay, you can turn around and put your hands down."

"Thanks."

"For nothing. Zilian, you got one minute to say your piece. And if you don't satisfy me, I'll use mine."

Zilian cocked his head toward the cabin and held it a moment listening. "Is the pilot all right? I don't hear anything."

He had got used to the dimness, and the light that seeped through from outside was more than enough to show him Robbie's grim smile.

"Better not hear anything. I handcuffed him to the stick and told him to stay quiet. One minute, I said."

"All I need is one minute." Stall. Stall while analyzing the young man's flight of fancy. Improvise. What "arrangements" would Robbie swallow? "I'd like to explain the arrangements, Robbie, but first I'd really be interested to hear why you're doing this."

He glanced at his watch. Hands

up, as though also under the gun, it told him he had been here in the plane with Robbie Hanna—and with the pilot, whose rustlings, as if shifting position, he heard from time to time—a full fifty minutes. Was it possible?

It was possible. His voice was hoarse with soothing and his legs were weary and trembly with standing and his neck stiff with keeping an ear out for the horn that would signal a rush—but there were compensations.

He beamed at the young man and nearly reached out fondly to pat Robbie on the Afro-styled hair. Very significant, that hairdo, in the case of a Caucasian. It showed a wish to astonish the great middle class, it showed a young man deeply troubled about his background and upbringing, it showed a young man highly disturbed about his adequacy. Dr. Zilian brought himself up sharply.

He had to laugh at himself, silently and tolerantly, for building a whole tower of reasoning on the blond Afro. This was hardly the time or the place to write up Robbie Hanna's case history in his mind. Still, it was only human to take satisfaction in finding this walking classical syndrome that was Robbie Hanna, but he refrained from reaching out to pat Robbie on the Afro-styled hair.

He would as soon reach out to pat a cobra's hood. The reaction could be as deadly. Your typical hijacker, he reminded himself, is a paranoid schizophrenic.

Your paranoid schizophrenic takes pleasure in taking pains to get himself killed—and takes along anyone who gets in his way. This goal of death glitters more alluringly than gain or rebellion.

After listening to a long and wandering diatribe against the Establishment—Dr. Zilian mentally substituted “Father”—and studying the total organism on the phenomenological level, Dr. Zilian nodded to himself in wonder. Why, it was almost as if the young man had studied the psychological profile of your typical hijacker, but this was not a textbook case, with time and space to footnote the Freudian fetishes of gun and cobra. This was a real-life, here-and-now cobra.

To charm a cobra, you need not the universal language of music, but body English. The flute is only stage dressing; snakes are not merely tone-deaf but stone-deaf. The snake charmer's rhythmic swaying is what makes the cobra sway in response. The cobra sways in dreamy fascination, forgetting it can move like the crack of a whip.

Dr. Zilian started. He saw that

his cobra was beginning to stop swaying to the body English of Dr. Zilian's encouraging nods, was beginning to run out of steam against the Establishment, was beginning to steal frowning glances at his own watch. Dr. Zilian sweated.

It would be a relief to hear the four blasts, two blasts, three blasts. What was Drury doing out there all this while, anyway? Though that would be the quick and easy way out—for himself, at least, if he threw himself out of the line of fire in time—it would be the bloody way, the wasteful way.

The ideal way—the professional and ethical way—would be to talk Robbie into laying his gun down and giving himself up.

Dr. Zilian knew that, as an older man, a father figure, he had begun to evoke transference. The trouble with transference was that it was ambivalent, awakening not only positive and friendly attitudes toward the analyst but negative and hostile attitudes, but give him a few more minutes and he felt he might tip the balance toward the positive.

He nodded encouragingly, but Robbie no longer went on and on, with apparent sincerity, about the shortcomings and failings of a capitalistic-imperialistic-materialistic society. He was no longer

under Dr. Zilian's sway. If there were transference, it was all negative.

"Get off the dime, Zilian. You haven't told me word one about the arrangements."

Dr. Zilian found himself sweating as freely as after a hard session of handball. The thing to do now, the only sane thing from a save-your-own-skin point of view, was quickly promise full compliance with Robbie's demands, absurd as they were, and get the hell out. Once out, he could give Drury the benefit of his observations—which, after all, was all that Drury had demanded.

Yet he stalled. Strangely, in spite of the hostility in it, Robbie's tone had been weary rather than curt. That remained in Zilian's favor, that Robbie seemed willing to give him more time; to hear him out.

"The arrangements. Yes. Let me put them in writing, so there shall be no mistake, hmmm?"

Moving his hands slowly, he patted his pockets looking for his pen. Gone. A touch of panic till he recalled he had left it in his attaché case which was in the coin locker. Did he still have the key? Another touch of panic till he felt the key in his pocket and brought it out. Ah. He glanced at the number stamped on it and put it

back in the pocket with relief.

"Foolish of me. I seem to have come without my pen. Do you have one I can borrow?"

Robbie, with a scornful smile, handed him a pencil stub. The folds of the frown fell back into place and Dr. Zilian hurried to fill the silence.

"Thank you, Robbie." He studied the chewed pencil stub. Very significant. Highly symbolic. He beamed at Robbie. "This will do nicely." He produced an old envelope of his own and spoke as he wrote on the back of it. "One billion dollars in gold bullion weighs more than 156 tons." Was Drury's figure right? Was he remembering it right? Wasn't the measure for gold troy weight? No matter, it was only dream dust. He rushed on.

"That means it will take a convoy of sixteen ten-ton trucks to bring the gold from the Sub-treasury Building in lower Manhattan." Where was all this coming from? From his unconscious mind, of course. He felt a glow of gratitude for the riches in the unplumbed depths of his mind, but he was also uneasy about them. They were likely to be fairy gold. The unconscious mind could not tell reality from fantasy. As the words came out he worried that Robbie would see he was no

transportation expert. Did ten-ton trucks mean the trucks themselves weighed ten tons or their loads weighed ten tons? No matter, Robbie wasn't questioning the figures. He rushed on.

"An hour to load, an hour to bring, another hour to offload onto the plane." He drew a deep breath but Robbie was still not challenging. He went on briskly.

"Now as to the terrorists—" he corrected himself hurriedly, "—or, as you call them, 'freedom fighters,' who are now in prison, their release will take a bit more time. They are, as you know, in widely scattered places. You will have to allow time to round them all up. Six hours?"

Robbie pursed his lips, then nodded. Dr. Zilian nodded back.

"If you care to check the figures, Robbie . . ."

Robbie took the envelope and looked it over slowly back and front. He nodded and returned the envelope to Dr. Zilian.

Pocketing the envelope, Dr. Zilian felt the key again. A train of associations highballed through his mind. *Split personality . . . North versus South . . . Civil War . . . The Confederacy . . . Lee . . .* Why should the venerable Southern general—rather, an equestrian statue of him—be doing a somersault in Dr. Zilian's mind?

Upside down, 337 spelled LEE. Why should that come to mind just now? Of course; 337 had been the number of the coin locker—he must have registered that subliminally—but the key that Virgil Drury had handed him, the one now in Dr. Zilian's pocket, the one he had lately glanced at and also registered subliminally, bore the number 013.

Either Drury had made a mistake or Drury had deliberately palmed the key to the locker holding the attaché case and had passed him the key to another locker.

A mistake? Even if it had been a mistake it would have been worth puzzling over. That was what psychoanalysis was all about. Mistakes had meaning. But it had been no mistake. Drury had purposely substituted another key.

Zilian's fingering went from the key to the envelope. His professional name and address had been on the face of the envelope but Robbie had given the envelope back without comment. He saw with chill certainty that Robbie had known all along just who he was; not Mr. Zilian of the FAA but Dr. Zilian the psychoanalyst.

The whole setup was a sham, a fantasy. He himself had been the cobra. They had charmed him. They had made him sway in re-

sponse to their movements; but once the cobra snapped out of it, once the cobra remembered that it could crack like a whip . . .

He stared at Robbie's hair, and knew. He had to laugh at himself, silently and angrily, for building a whole tower of reasoning on the blond Afro. The blond Afro was no doubt a wig. He lowered his gaze so Robbie could not read the knowledge and resolve in his eyes. He held out the pencil stub.

"Here you go, Robbie."

Robbie reached out. Dr. Zilian let the pencil fall. Robbie's eyes followed the pencil. Dr. Zilian told himself Robbie's gun hand was a handball. He chopped a blow at the handball. He caught the gun as it fell from the nerveless fingers.

Dr. Zilian gestured with the gun and followed Robbie to the cockpit.

The pilot looked startled, then his face broke out in a smile. He got up and took a step toward them and held out his hand for the gun.

"Thank God! I'll hold him while you go out and get the law."

Not good enough. Where were the handcuffs? Hadn't Robbie said he had handcuffed the man to the stick? Dr. Zilian swung the gun to cover the pilot as well.

"Stay right where you are. What switch do I use to talk to the tower?"

The pilot looked hesitant. Robbie stopped nursing one hand with the other and spat something at the pilot in a foreign tongue. The pilot pressed his lips tight.

Dr. Zilian sighed. "No matter, I will find it."

He found it.

He smiled hopefully at the real FBI agent.

"Did you get Drury?"

"Drury? Oh, yes. That's not his real name, of course, and Robbie Hanna isn't Robbie Hanna and the pilot isn't Joe Conger. 'Drury' was at your office in Manhattan, with another one of the team. They were putting everything back in order when we nabbed them. A few minutes more and they'd have been all set to head back here to LaGuardia, leaving no sign of a break-in."

"Did you catch them with the . . . the . . . ?"

"The goods? Sure did. They had the rolls of film on them."

Dr. Zilian grew grave.

"You will destroy the rolls of film of course."

The FBI man looked shocked, then explained as to a child.

"They're evidence, Doctor. We have to develop them and use

them to convict the spies. But that will all take place in secret session, so you don't have to worry."

Dr. Zilian eyed him severely, though he was not at all worried.

"It had better remain confidential if you wish my further cooperation. My patients come first." He smiled sadly at the FBI man. "That was the whole aim of the operation, wasn't it? To ferret out my patients' secrets. I have many VIP patients. And I have many more who are young and upwardly mobile. In time, these too will fill high posts in government and business and will also be ripe for blackmail by this foreign power." He thought he knew but he couldn't help asking. "You still won't tell me which one?"

The agent looked apologetic. "I can't, Doctor. The lid's on. We don't want to make an international incident out of it. After all, they didn't get away with it."

Dr. Zilian nodded. He smiled suddenly. "They too would have kept the lid on it, as you say. They would have played it out to the end for my benefit. Robbie—I can't help thinking of him as that—Robbie would have 'surrendered' and Drury—I can't help thinking of *him* as that—Drury would have invoked 'national security' to keep me from talking

about the little drama I had found myself in."

"I guess you're right, Doctor. The success of the operation hinged on your never realizing your files had been compromised."

Dr. Zilian looked rueful. "And if it had worked out as Drury had planned, I never would have realized that my patients' hidden lives were, as I believe you say, 'blown.' Drury and that other member of his team would have made believe to lead Robbie away into custody. Drury would have remained behind long enough to take the locker key back from me and fetch my attaché case and carry-on bag while I rested here in the lounge, recovering from my ordeal. And by now I would be taxiing home blissfully."

He grimaced guiltily, then forgave himself with a smile. "The reason it did not work out as Drury had planned is that I am not so foolish as to file the cases of my patients under their true names. The spies had ample time to photograph my files while I was abroad but it must have begun to dawn on them fairly quickly, as they went through my files and photographed them, that the names on the files are all protective pseudonyms."

He smiled. "That must have been a frustrating experience for

them." His smile faded. "Then I suppose they reasoned that there had to be a master list with the real names on it, for billing purposes. Perhaps they imagined, or gambled, that I carry the master list with me." He smiled broadly. "I am not so foolish as to keep the master list in my attaché case. I keep it in a very secure wall safe in my apartment, which is in the same suite as my office."

The FBI man nodded with a faint smile.

For a moment Dr. Zilian stared at him suspiciously, then gave a start and paled.

"Then their gamble did pay off? I keep the combination to the safe in my attaché case." He looked apologetic. "I have to keep it somewhere because for some reason I have a habit of forgetting the combination. Did they . . . ?"

The FBI man nodded again with a broader smile.

"Yes, they had got the combination from your attaché case and had opened your safe and photographed your master list. They were putting the list back in the safe when we surprised them."

He showed Dr. Zilian a sealed roll of film. He shook his head.

"I don't know how it happened, but I got turned around on my way to find you in this terminal building and I passed through the

detector several times. The X-ray dose is supposed to be not heavy enough to fog film, but somehow I have the feeling this roll is fogged." He pocketed it again with a shrug. "I'm sure we'll make out all right with the other rolls, though. Still, we'll have to hold onto this one for a while, anyway, as evidence."

Dr. Zilian brightened. Then he frowned. "That they were aware of my trip to Vienna, and of the opportunity it gave them to photograph my files, I can understand. But how did they know—in time to set this pseudo-skyjack up—that I would be coming home sooner than I had planned?"

The agent grinned. "Their own side, which staged the walkout and broke up the conference, should've warned them—but probably didn't. That's always the case in intelligence work: one hand doesn't know what the other hand's doing. So I'd say they learned about it through the media. The walkout of the iron-curtain delegates made the headlines and the prime-time newscasts

here. So they got ready to welcome you the way they did. The aircraft was simply a charter, parked conveniently. Conger, the so-called pilot, long ago infiltrated himself as a maintenance worker here at LaGuardia. That made access to the plane, and use of it, easy enough."

He got up to go. "I guess that's it for now. We'll keep in touch with you and let you know as much as we can as we learn more." He clasped Dr. Zilian's hand warmly. "So long, Doctor, and thanks."

Dr. Zilian, musing, shook his head sadly. "Yes, that was a traumatic moment. To watch one's colleagues withdraw into autistic thinking, and to have them walk out because the rest of us would not go along with their claim that there is no such thing as autistic thinking, that what we call autistic thinking is merely a defense against the repressive materialistic values of Western society . . ."

He looked around embarrassed. He was talking to himself.



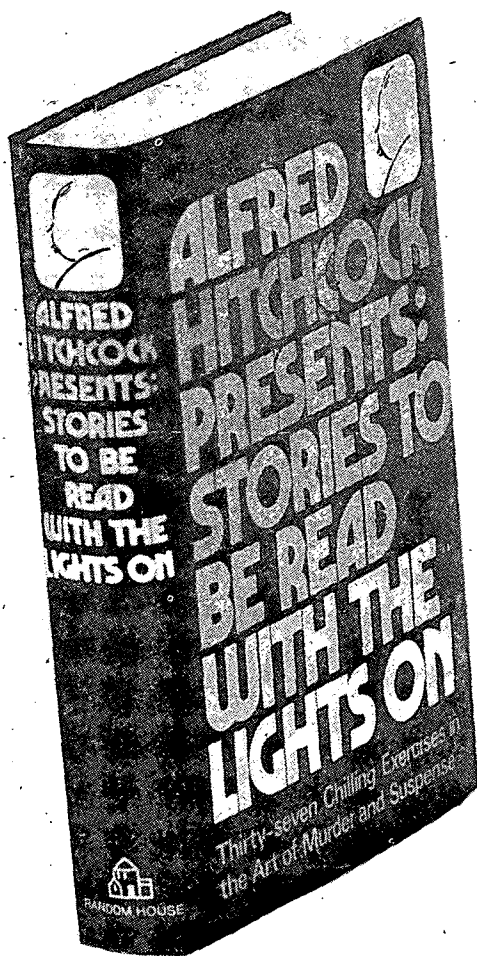
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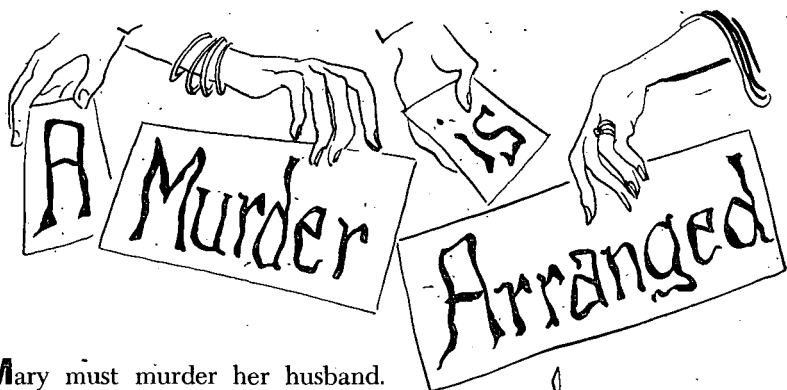
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When Fate will not oblige, one may have to resort to some trickery.



Mary must murder her husband. There was nothing else to do. She hadn't the slightest doubt about it.

She had forgiven John everything except for his actions these last few weeks.

No, that wasn't putting it accurately. She hadn't forgiven him anything. Until recently, there had been nothing to forgive, no matter what people might have thought.

John was the ideal mate for her. What would her life have been without him? When she thought of the husbands of her friends—those dull, earnest, aspiring types—she shuddered. How blessed she had been to have John instead of one of them.

John was exactly right for her.

by
Nedra Tyre

Her mother, her sisters, aunts, cousins and friends had said that she was too good for John; though, mind you, they admitted that he was fascinating, a real charmer, the best company in the world. What they deplored was that John wrapped her around his little finger. That was what they all harped upon. She did what he wanted, she danced to his tune.

They twitted her that no matter what she thought, John didn't put the sun in the sky. They were

wrong—John had put the sun in her sky; he *was* the sun in her sky.

If only they could have realized what had happened. She was no longer dancing to John's tune. She wasn't being twisted around his little finger.

She was about to murder him.

The only hindrance was that she had no idea how to murder John. Exactly how did a self-respecting woman go about killing her husband?

Why hadn't she learned how to shoot from her father and brothers? Marksmen all, they could so easily have taught her how to reach John's heart with one bullet—but there would be an awful noise and no doubt a great deal of blood. Besides, if she shot John, her relatives and friends would no doubt say that John had got his just deserts at last. Nor did she have any intention of being tried for John's murder—that would defeat her purpose. John's death must be made to look either natural or accidental.

It had been foolish for people to insist that she was too good for John and she did not intend that anyone should crow or gloat over John's death. Because, for all his infidelities, he was everything she wanted. When they were together at dinners and parties his eyes

didn't wander. Of course he greeted other women, exchanged pleasantries with them, complimented them on their clothes and appearance, but his arm embraced Mary all the while.

In contrast, how inexcusable was the behavior of the other husbands. At dances at the club, at cocktail parties in private homes, those other men began to make passes with the first whiff of Scotch, while John was beside Mary feeding her cream cheese-and-chives dip and asking if she wanted more ice in her drink. His lapses might have been many, but they were all done with finesse while she was out of sight. He was careful to see that she lost no face. There was no flaunting of any of his encounters. Whenever he had been away with someone else he had acted like a dutiful son, sending flowers to Mama, writing cards and letters, assuring her that his love for her was deep and eternal. For a brief time he was, figuratively, only a jaunty dog gamboling down the street for a short trot and would return soon; and when he did return his arms were loaded with lavish presents.

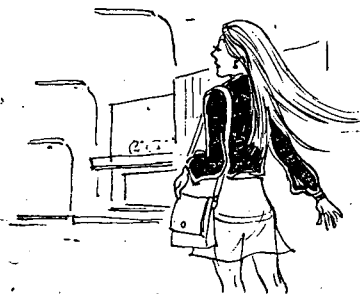
Well, if people called that being twisted around John's little finger she preferred it to the sort of sneaky liaisons indulged in by

other men in their social group.

All this mulling was getting her no closer to dispatching John. She must murder him in a quiet, unobtrusive way. She much preferred that there be no blood.

What about suffocating him?

No, that wouldn't do. The poor man would gasp and would turn purple and John was much too



handsome to spend his last moments in such an agitated manner. Besides, she doubted that she had sufficient strength to strangle or suffocate him.

How sad that it had come to this—that her love for him, her devotion, infatuation, commitment, whatever it was, anyway her total absorption in him had been ruined.

His character, attitude and persona had altered entirely. He had become messy and slovenly. The impeccable, faultlessly groomed John had disappeared altogether, and he had begun to act like a sa-

tyr. When he accompanied her on shopping trips he would stop in the middle of a sidewalk to ogle a young girl. At the check-out counter he would make a pass at the clerk. John had always drunk well. He could drink for hours and not show it. Now his speech was often slurred. He even walked unsteadily.



His manners had become boorish. He didn't compliment Mary any longer on her cooking, but would scrape the food to one side of the plate as if it were beneath his contempt.

He had begun to speak harshly to her. *Dear, darling, beloved*, all those endearments with which he had addressed her, had been deleted from his conversation as if they were obscene. Formerly he had hung upon every word she ut-

tered. Now he often pretended he hadn't heard what she said. Twice he had told her to shut up—this from John who had never raised his voice in speaking to her! Now he had become a bully and a ruffian.

She was chagrined and mortified.

But how on earth was she to murder him?

There were no long flights of stairs down which she could send him spinning.

There was no swimming pool in which she might conveniently drown him.

More than anything, his new grossness disgusted her. How had he contrived that leer? When had she ever refused him? When hadn't she welcomed him with open arms? How dare he use those earthy, demeaning approaches when he wanted to make love? When had she ever been coy? Love was an open, defenseless plain upon which lovers met without reservation or pretense and he was behaving now as if their passion were vulgar and degrading. He made her feel cheap.

For the first time ever he had forgotten her birthday, and on their wedding anniversary, instead of taking her to the customary champagne dinner and showering

her with dozens of roses and carnations and an exquisite chiffon nightgown, he had yawned and said he was much too tired to go out—a ham sandwich and a bottle of beer in the kitchen were all that he wanted. Then he had said in an offhand but cutting manner that there had been enough celebrations of an event so long in the past and he was sure she was as weary of them as he was.

Finally, what set a limit to his few remaining days on earth was his cruel reference to their having no children. "It's damned bleak, isn't it, not to have any children? Nothing but the two of us."

He really was a brute. Just the two of them was what he had insisted upon! He had said he did not want children who would only come between them and their happiness. They were complete in themselves. They needed nothing and no one else.

John must die immediately for rejecting that premise on which so much of their joy had been based. She must get this caricature that her husband had become into the ground immediately.

Yet she owed him something for the happiness that they had shared and so, to honor that debt, she would murder him decently and quietly by giving him an overdose of sleeping pills.

Why had it taken her so long to think of the one perfect method? It seemed stupid of her not to have arrived at it long before, but perhaps she had needed to be goaded by that final insult of not having borne him any children.

John knew he hadn't deserved Mary, but he had made her happy. He believed in love and rapture, and he had loved her completely. He was a romantic. Men were the romantics of this world and women were the practical ones.

There had been many women in his life, but Mary had come first and she knew it. He went out of his way to show her. Not that he had exploited the others. He had reason to think that he had made them happy, too. Mary, though, was his life. His flirtations had never brought shame to Mary or made her feel neglected. They had been minor skirmishes, and only added piquancy to the passion he felt for Mary. He wished he could have given her the world, but he had no knack for business, and he was grateful to his grandfather who had set up a trust fund for him shortly before he and Mary were married, and had then promptly and conveniently died. Also, Mary had her own tidy annuities gleaned from

several rich and thrifty great-aunts and some cousins twice removed. He was grateful to them all. He loved women, no matter how old or young they were so long as they were pleasant.

He had a gift for love and dalliance.

But he had no courage and he could not endure pain, and he could not abide sympathy. Illness robbed a man of everything. He could not confront agony and anguish. Perhaps that was why he had punished himself when he was younger by doing volunteer hospital work in the wards filled with the hopelessly ill. He had seen so many die hideous deaths of what he now had—but he refused to accept that painful, lingering death for himself. Perhaps he had thought that he could trick life into giving him an easy death if he helped others in pain. Well, life couldn't be manipulated; fate wouldn't oblige.

Mary, however, could be manipulated.

All those relatives and friends had joked over the years that John could twist Mary around his finger. It was true. He could have, but he hadn't. Yet now that he needed to manipulate her he knew that he could.

John might have taken his own life, but that would have been

cowardly. It would have been an affront to Mary, who had made him completely happy—the life she had given him was more than happy, it had been blissful. To the world his suicide would have negated their perfect years together, and it would have placed upon Mary a terrible, unendurable burden of guilt. Mary must be made to give him death. An easy one. A quick one.

He knew her so well and was precisely aware of how she responded to him and what there was about him that attracted her. It would be a matter of only a few weeks until he could make her take his life.

The days had gone as he had predicted and Mary's disgust had flourished. He knew the exact moment when she had accumulated

enough sleeping pills, and the next morning he pushed himself across the bed and nudged her—she had taken to sleeping as far away from him as the width of the large bed allowed. His voice was sharp and demanding, "I want a large glass of orange juice and I want it immediately."

Mary sprang out of bed and grabbed her robe and hurried to the kitchen. She was gone only a little while and John saw her hand quiver as she set a small tray holding the orange juice on the bedside table. He rudely jerked the glass from the tray and gulped the juice.

Only then could he trust himself to smile at her. "Thank you, darling," he said, but she had already left the room and did not hear him.

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A wife may be helpful not by lengthy discourse but merely by apparently being attentive.



Maggie's Grip



a novelette by Richard Deming

I was working the four p.m.-to-midnight trick out of Homicide when the call came in from the Carondelet Precinct, way down on the south side of St. Louis.

I logged the call as coming in at 6:02 p.m., but it was 6:30 by the time I got to the scene, a good ten miles from headquarters.

The address was a two-story frame house, probably fifty years old, but in good condition. In front of it was a police car, a black sedan with MD license plates, and a crowd of onlookers.

Harry Dodge, who had gone through the Police Academy with me a quarter of a century ago, opened the door. I had forgotten that Harry now worked out of the Carondelet Precinct. He had never made it beyond the rank of patrolman and was still in uniform, but one several sizes larger than he wore when we graduated from the academy.

"Hi, Sod," he said in a pleased voice as I moved inside, past him, then poked a finger into my belly. "Hey, you been putting it on, buddy."

"If I was a pot, I wouldn't comment about a kettle," I growled at him.

A lean, leathery-looking man in a tan jacket and a plump woman in a house dress sat in the front room, the man probably fifty, the woman perhaps ten years younger. After closing the door behind me, Harry introduced them as Henry Crowder and his wife Emma, then added that Mrs. Crowder had discovered the body.

I asked both of them how they did, and asked them to please stand by until I could get to them. Then to Harry I said, "Where is it?"

"In the kitchen."

He led the way into a central hall where we met a tall, graying man just emerging from the kitchen. He was carrying a medical bag.

Coming to a halt, Harry said, "This is Dr. Lischer, Sod, the victim's doctor. Mrs. Crowder called him instead of us when she discovered the body. After talking to her, he phoned the precinct before he came over." To the doctor he said, "Sergeant Sod Harris of the Homicide Squad, Doc."

Shifting his medical bag from his right hand to his left, Dr. Lischer shook hands with me. "Glad to know you, Sergeant. Terrible thing. She was only twenty-eight."

"They're all terrible," I said. "Mind sticking around a few minutes until after I've had a look at the body?"

"No, of course not."

He went on into the front room. Harry and I continued into the kitchen. Another uniformed cop was in there, leaning against the back door. He was in his mid-twenties and looked vaguely familiar.

There was also a corpse in the room. It belonged to a fairly attractive blonde, slim and pleasantly contoured. She was wearing a light cloth coat, unbuttoned and wide open, over a street dress, no hat and an expression of surprise. She lay flat on her back in the center of the kitchen with the handle of what appeared to be a butcher knife protruding from between her breasts. On the floor to the left of her body was an open purse from which a number of items had fallen when it dropped to the floor. To her right was an old-fashioned iron door key. It seemed apparent that she had been stabbed just after entering by the back door, apparently as she was in the act of replacing the

key in her voluminous purse. The young patrolman said, "Hi, Sarge."

"Hi," I said. "I know you, but I can't place from where."

"Carl Budd. You were on the first homicide call I ever answered, back when I was a rookie. The Thursday-night Strangler."

"Oh yeah, the guy who sent happy birthday wires to his victims before he killed them."

Glancing around, I spotted on the wall over the stove a rack of knives with black wooden handles similar to that of the murder weapon. They were of assorted sizes, ranging from a small paring knife to a carving knife with an eight-inch blade. The only vacant space looked as though it might accommodate the butcher knife stuck into the corpse.

Seeing me looking at the rack, Harry said, "That's what we figured, too. The killer grabbed it from there because it was handy."

Grunting, I looked back down at the dead woman. "What was her name?"

"Joan Turnbull. Mrs. Joan Turnbull, although her husband don't live here. According to Mrs. Crowder, they've been separated about four months, and the victim lived here alone. Mrs. Crowder also has pretty well pinpointed the time of death to within a

minute or so of five-thirty." Glancing at a wall clock, he said, "About an hour and five minutes ago."

"How'd she pinpoint it?" I asked.

"She heard Mrs. Turnbull come home, then discovered the body only minutes later."

Although that wasn't awfully clear to me, I decided the details could wait until I talked to Mrs. Crowder. "She know who did it?" I asked.

Harry shook his head. "Seems to have been a prowler who panicked when she walked in on him. There's some drawers dumped out in the other rooms. My guess is nobody saw him because he lammed out the back way. If you'll look out back, you'll see the yard is enclosed by a high wooden fence that would have kept him from being seen by neighbors if he headed for the alley. At any rate he wasn't seen."

"Oh, you've asked all those people out front?"

He flushed slightly. "Well, no, but no one has come forward to report seeing anything."

That was why Harry Dodge was still a patrolman after twenty-five years. If he had been a rookie, I would have jolted him alive with some acid comments on how to make a preliminary inves-

tigation, but you can't do that to a veteran of twenty-five years even if he deserves it.

I said, as pleasantly as I could manage, "Better go see if anyone saw anything before the crowd disperses. Maybe you'd better hit the nearby houses on both sides of the street too, just in case some of the neighbors have gone back inside."

"Okay," he said agreeably, and headed for the front of the house.

I went over to peer through the glass pane of the back door into the yard. In mid-March, sunset was about six p.m., and it was just now starting to get dark. It was still light enough, though, to see that the yard was enclosed by a seven-foot-high board fence. At the rear of the yard, some fifty feet away, was a garage that gave onto an alley. Next to it was a gate in the fence, also leading to the alley.

I tried the back door, found it unlocked and stepped out onto the back porch. From it I could see over the top of the fence onto the back porches on either side, which meant anyone on their back porches at the time the killer emerged from the house could have seen him too. I could also see the back porches of the houses whose rears faced this way from the other side of the alley.

I went down the porch steps and along a concrete walk to the garage. The door leading from the yard into the garage was unlocked. A red, two-seat sports car was parked inside. A car radiator will stay warm for a couple of hours after the car has been driven long enough to heat the engine thoroughly, and this one was still warm enough to indicate it had been standing for not much more than an hour. It seemed reasonable to assume that Joan Turnbull had arrived home in that car.

The garage door giving onto the alley was the overhead type. I swung it up, then back down again. It made considerable noise going both ways, the springs creaking loudly and the door settling into place with a subdued slam.

Returning to the kitchen, I told Carl Budd to go across the alley and inquire at each house if any neighbors had seen anyone enter or leave here by the back door an hour or so earlier.

When the young patrolman had left, I stooped to examine the victim's shoes. They had those thick, ungraceful Italian heels that have become so popular, with metal cleats on them to retard wear.

Rising from my stooped position, I went into the front room. Dr. Lischer had taken a seat

there, but when I came in he rose and picked up the medical bag alongside his chair. Apparently he was in more of a hurry than he had indicated.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Doctor," I said. "May I have your report now?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you much except that she's dead, Sergeant. I understand from Mrs. Crowder here that death occurred about five-thirty. That conforms to the physical condition of the body: Mrs. Crowder phoned me at twenty of six. I called the police, then came over as soon as I could. I had an emergency patient, so I wasn't able to get here until about six-fifteen. By then the police were already here."

"I see. I assume you didn't move the body."

"Oh, of course not. I also instructed Mrs. Crowder over the phone not to touch anything."

I gave him an approving nod. "Was Mrs. Turnbull a regular patient of yours?"

"Yes. Mrs. Crowder also, which I assume is why she called me."

"Any particular condition you were treating Mrs. Turnbull for?"

He shook his head. "When I say she was a regular patient, I merely mean I was her family physician. Aside from an occasional viral infection, she was in

generally good health, you see."

"Okay, Doctor. Thanks for your trouble."

"You're welcome, Sergeant. I'm happy to be of service."

When he had left, I turned to the Crowders. "Just how close neighbors are you people? Right next door?"

Both nodded. The leathery Henry Crowder pointed toward the dining room. "On that side."

I looked at his wife. "It was you who discovered the body, Mrs. Crowder?"

"Yes," she said. "Henry wasn't even home from work yet. He just came over to keep me company after the police got here."

"I see. Then actually you have no direct knowledge of events, Mr. Crowder?"

"Just what Emma told me."

Turning back to Mrs. Crowder, I said, "Just how did you happen to discover the body so quickly after it happened?"

"I was waiting for Joan to come home so I could show her a pattern I had bought. She always got home from work exactly at five-thirty. You could set your clock by it. She worked in a law office at Grand and Gravois as a legal secretary, you know. The lawyers all left at four-thirty, then she could close up when she wanted. She always left there exactly at

five-fifteen, and it took fifteen minutes for her to drive home. So I was listening for her."

"Listening?" I said. "Don't you mean watching?"

She shook her head. "The fence is too high to watch. But I could always hear her come home because her garage door squeaks and bangs when it's opened and closed, then I could also hear her heels click on the walk. Today when I heard her, I looked at my kitchen clock, and sure enough it was right at five-thirty. I gave her five minutes to get her coat off and get herself settled, then I came over." She gave a little shiver. "He must have just barely left when I got here. If I hadn't waited that five minutes, more than likely I'd be dead too."

"Possibly," I agreed. "How did you come over? I mean out your alley gate and in by this one, or out your front door to this front door?"

"Neither. Out the front way, down the walk between our houses, and in by the gate at the bottom of the back porch steps. Don't ask me why I do that instead of going to Joan's front door, which would be closer. I just always have. Maybe because we always ended up in the kitchen anyway for coffee."

"I take it you were on quite

friendly terms with Mrs. Turnbull, then."

"Oh yes, we were close friends."

I said, "When you came in by that gate, the killer must have just left by the gate into the alley. Did you hear that gate click shut; or anyone running down the alley, or anything at all?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I went up the porch steps, and was just raising my fist to knock on the back door when I saw through the glass pane in the top of the door that Joan was lying on her back on the kitchen floor. I didn't notice the knife in her until after I opened the door and went in. Then I almost fainted." After a moment, she added with a touch of pride, "I didn't scream, though, like they always do in the movies."

I didn't deflate her ego by telling her that women in the movies scream at the sight of bodies because it's written in the script, and in real life they're more apt to go into silent shock. I just said, "What did you do?"

"As soon as I could bring myself to move, I ran into the hall to phone Dr. Lischer." Her tone became apologetic. "I think I knew she was dead the minute I saw that knife in her; so in the back of my mind I knew a doctor wasn't

going to do her any good. But I was so upset, all I could think of was getting Dr. Lischer over here."

"You did fine," I assured her. "A doctor had to declare her dead anyway, so it saved bringing some intern all the way from City Hospital. You have any idea who killed her?"

She looked surprised. "How would I know who the burglar was?"

"You figure it was a burglar?"

"What else? I heard one of those policemen say some drawers were dumped out."

"Yeah, he told me. I haven't had a chance to check that out yet. I understand Mrs. Turnbull was separated from her husband."

Mrs. Crowder nodded, then her eyes suddenly widened. "You don't think . . ."

When she let it trail off, I said, "I haven't the slightest idea. Who is he?"

"Addison Turnbull. He works for the Marks Carburetor Company."

"As what?"

"He's just a worker on the assembly line." She sniffed. "He's always been way below Joan intellectually. She was a trained legal secretary, while he just worked with his hands. I never could understand why she was so

crazy about him that she didn't want to let him go." After a pause she added, "I never said that to her, of course."

"Was it an amicable separation?" I asked.

Henry Crowder said laconically, "Hardly."

Both of us looked at him. When he said nothing more, I looked back at his wife.

Emma Crowder said argumentatively, "Joan wasn't giving him a hard time, Henry. If there was any bad feeling, it was on his side."

Henry said, "Maybe she wasn't giving him a hard time, but she wasn't turning him loose either." To me he explained, "Ad has another girl he wants to marry, but Joan wouldn't agree to a divorce. She wanted him back."

Mrs. Crowder rendered her opinion of this desire by emitting another sniff.

After a short pause, her husband said, "Joan's mother wanted to see it patched up, too. Last time I saw Ad, he told me she was bugging him with phone calls nearly every night."

"He has Mrs. Phelps as snowed as he had Joan," Emma Crowder said with disgust. "Even after the way he's treated her daughter, she mothers him like he was her own son."

"Well, Ad has always liked Stella too," Henry said. "He told me he wished she would stop bugging him to go back to Joan, but otherwise he's as fond of her as before the breakup."

"How did Mrs. Turnbull's father feel about the separation?" I asked.

Mrs. Crowder said, "He's been dead for years. Mrs. Phelps lives alone somewhere out in the west end."

Taking out my notebook, I wrote the name Stella Phelps in it, then said, "I take it you don't know her address?"

"No, but Joan kept an address-and-phone-number book on the telephone table in the hall. It should be in there."

I wrote down the name Addison Turnbull and asked if either knew his address.

"That should be in her book too," Emma Crowder said. "He's only a few blocks from here, over on Bates. He moved in with a bachelor friend named Lionel Short, who works at Marks with him."

I went to the phone table in the central hallway and found both addresses. After writing them in my notebook, I returned to the front room just as Harry Dodge came back in from outside.

"Nothing," he reported. "No

one saw or heard anything at all."

A moment later Carl Budd came through the central hallway from the kitchen and made a similar report about the neighbors across the alley.

I thanked the Crowders for their help and told them they could go home. As they were leaving, Art Ward from the lab showed up. I took him to the kitchen, told him what I wanted, left him there, and made a tour of the rest of the house while he was doing it.

There were four rooms on the first floor, clustered around the central hall. At the back were a kitchen and a TV room, at the front the parlor and dining room. On one side of the hallway was a bathroom, on the other side were stairways to the basement and second floor.

In the dining room the bottom drawer of the sideboard, containing nothing but linens, had been pulled out and was upended on the floor. In the TV room there was a combination bookcase-desk with a small drawer underneath the desk for stationery and writing implements. This drawer had also been pulled out and upended on the floor.

Those two dumped drawers were the only evidence of disturbance on the first floor.

I climbed to the second floor. There were two bedrooms and a second bath up there. There was no sign of disturbance.

I went down to the basement and gave it a thorough looking-over. Nothing seemed to be out of place there.

Going back upstairs, I checked the other drawers of the dining-room sideboard. One contained a set of sterling silver. Another contained a piggy bank full of dimes.

Art was finished in the kitchen by the time I completed my tour. He reported that he had taken pictures of the body from three different angles and had dusted the butcher knife for prints. There had been none. He wanted to know if it was okay to remove the knife from the body.

When I told him yes, he pulled it out, sealed it in a large manila envelope, marked it as evidence, and we both initialed it.

I said, "There's no sign of forced entry anywhere. Want to look at the locks on the front and back doors to see if either has been scratched by a picklock?"

He went over to examine the back-door lock, then gave me a wry grin. "I thought that by now everybody had replaced these old-fashioned open-keyhole locks with modern ones. If this was a prowler job, you don't have to

look any further. You can buy a skeleton key in any dime store that will open this."

Nevertheless I had him examine the front-door lock also, then, in afterthought and just to be thorough, the lock to the basement's outside door. Neither showed any sign of tampering.

When I had him take photographs of the two dumped drawers, Art began to get it. "Hey," he said, "this was a setup, wasn't it? Not a very good one either."

"The killer didn't take much time," I agreed. "But then, maybe he didn't have much."

When Art Ward left, I phoned for a morgue wagon and told Harry Dodge and Carl Budd to stand by until it came for the body. Then I drove over to the apartment where Addison Turnbull lived with his friend, Lionel Short.

The apartment building was on Bates, about four short blocks from Joan Turnbull's house on Dewey.

Turnbull's apartment was on the ground floor. When I rang the bell, a thin, rather handsome but jaded-looking man of around thirty answered the door. He was in shirt sleeves and had a folded newspaper in his hand.

"Mr. Turnbull?" I asked.

He shook his head. "His apart-



ment-mate." Over his shoulder he called, "It's for you, Ad!" Returning to the easy chair from which my ring had roused him, he disappeared behind his newspaper.

A muscular, blond, good-looking man of about the same age came from another room and over to the door. He also was in shirt sleeves, had an apron around his waist, and carried a dish towel.

"My night to do the dishes," he said in wry apology. "What can I do for you?"

I showed him the badge clipped inside my wallet. "Sergeant Sod Harris of Homicide," I said. "Mind if I come in?"

His eyes widened and he stepped aside. I put away my wallet, moved past him and waited for him to close the door. The thin, jaded-looking man

folded his newspaper, set it aside and stared at me from eyes as widespread as Turnbull's.

When I was first assigned to Homicide, I used to try to dream up ways to break the news of murder gently to the next of kin. Quite often, I soon learned, it wasn't news, and even when it was, gentleness didn't seem to soften the blow. Now, whenever I have the least suspicion that I'm not bringing any news, I just make the bald announcement and watch for reaction.

I said, "Mr. Turnbull, your wife was murdered at five-thirty this afternoon."

Both men's eyes became even wider. Turnbull asked on a high note, "Where?"

"In her home."

"How?"

"With a butcher knife. We think from that set hanging over the stove."

He licked his lips. "It happened in the kitchen, then, huh?"

I nodded.

"Have you caught the prowler?"

I examined him curiously. "Now, why do you assume it was a prowler?"

His eyes shifted away from me and he licked his lips again. In an oddly defensive tone he said, "Didn't you say it happened at five-thirty?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, she always arrives home exactly at five-thirty. I used to set my watch by her. You also said it happened in the kitchen. I guess I just assumed she surprised a prowler when she walked in the back door."

He looked so guilty, I very nearly gave him the customary warning and arrested him on the spot. I held off only because I could hardly believe it was going to be that easy.

It wasn't, I discovered, when I asked him to account for his time. He could account for every second of it from the time he left work at four-thirty until right now. There was a space during the actual time of the murder when I momentarily thought I

might break his alibi, but eventually that checked out too.

It developed that he and his apartment-mate had left work together at four-thirty, had ridden home together on the South Grand bus, and had gotten there at ten after five. Neither had actually checked the time when they walked into the apartment, but both insisted it had to be within a minute or so of five-ten because they made the same bus trip every day and always arrived home at the same time.

Lionel Short said, "I usually look at my watch when we get home, just out of curiosity to see how close to five-ten it is. And we've never been more than two minutes off. I didn't look today because the phone was ringing when we walked in, and I ran to answer it." He emitted a cackling little laugh. "It was Ad's girlfriend again."

I looked at Turnbull. "The girl you planned to marry if you could get your wife to agree to a divorce?"

He looked startled. His apartment-mate emitted another cackling laugh, then explained it by saying, "I was being satiric, Sergeant. It was his mother-in-law. Ad spends half his life talking to her on the phone."

"Oh," I said.

Addison Turnbull said wryly, "Tonight we talked for forty minutes." Then a thought occurred to him. "Hey, I must have been talking to her at the very moment Joan was killed."

"You were," Short affirmed. "I *did* note the time when I returned from the supermarket, and you were still on the phone. It was exactly a quarter to six"

I perked up my ears. That was when I got the momentary hope that I might be able to break Turnbull's alibi. I said, "You weren't here at five-thirty, Mr. Short?"

"No. I went out to buy something for dinner. There's a supermarket just a block away at Grand and Bates. I was gone from about a quarter after five until a quarter of six."

I contemplated him in silence for some moments before asking, "You sure Mr. Turnbull was still actually talking to his mother-in-law?"

"Of course." Then he caught the significance of the question and let out another of his cackling little laughs. "You mean maybe Ad tried to con me by talking into a dead phone? You don't know Mrs. Phelps. Her voice on the telephone carries clear across the room. I could hear her still talking plainly enough even to tell

you what she said. She was telling Ad that Joan realized she had been wrong to downgrade him for not having a better job, and had promised to look up to him and make him feel like the man of the house if he would come back. Then, a little later, I heard her say something about having a casserole in the oven, so she had to hang up."

My hope almost flickered out, but not quite. There was still the possibility that Mrs. Phelps had phoned twice—or that Turnbull had called her back after the first conversation—and that there had been sufficient time between the two calls for Turnbull to make the round trip to the house on Dewey and back. However, that would have to wait until I talked to Mrs. Phelps.

Taking out my notebook, I said to Addison Turnbull, "I'll need the name of your girlfriend. The real one, I mean."

He stared at me in frowning silence.

"The girl you plan to marry," I prompted.

"I know who you mean. What's she got to do with this?"

I shrugged. "Quite possibly nothing. On the other hand, maybe she got tired of waiting for you to talk your wife into a divorce, and decided to make you

an eligible widower. I'll get to her eventually, whether you give me her name or not. It will be simpler if you cooperate."

After glumly thinking this over, his face suddenly brightened and he said with an air of triumph, "She couldn't have killed Joan. She works from four until midnight. She's working right now."

"Oh? Where?"

"At Martin's Steakhouse on Kingshighway. She's the hostess."

"I know the place," I said. "Her name?"

"Sylvia Baumgartner."

After writing down the name, I put away my notebook and said, "I guess that's all for now. You'll stay available, Mr. Turnbull?"

"I wasn't planning any out-of-town trips," he said sourly.

"If I want to contact you tomorrow, will you be at work?"

He shook his head. "Tomorrow's Saturday. I'll be here."

"Fine." I pulled open the door, then paused and turned. "One last thing. You don't seem overly grieved at becoming a widower."

"I was trying to divorce the woman, Sergeant," he said sardonically. "I wasn't wishing her dead, but frankly I was fed up to the eyebrows with her. If you want me to pretend, I suppose I could squeeze out a few crocodile tears."

"Don't bother on my account," I said. I went out and pulled the door closed behind me.

Sylvia Baumgartner turned out to be a sleek, brittle redhead in her mid-twenties. She also turned out to have been in full view of the restaurant manager, a dozen waitresses, and a varying number of customers from four p.m., when she started work, until I got there at eight.

Mrs. Stella Phelps lived in an apartment in the 4300 block of Maryland. I got there about eight-thirty.

The victim's mother was a plump blonde in her mid-fifties with a pleasant but rather moon-like face. She came to the door red-eyed from crying, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. It developed that Addison Turnbull had phoned her to break the news of her daughter's death while I was en route.

She invited me in, had me sit in an easy chair, and sank onto the sofa across from me. After giving her eyes another dab with her handkerchief, she squared her plump shoulders and smiled bravely.

"I'm not cried out yet, Sergeant," she said. "But I know you have a job to do, so I'll postpone my grief until a more appropriate time. Joan was my only child, you

know, and since my husband died ten years ago, she's all I had left. Ad has always been as close to me as a son, but of course he's no blood relation, and he and Joan were separated, so he may not think of me as his mother-in-law anymore. I'm sure they were going to get back together eventually, but now it's too late."

She touched the handkerchief to her eyes again. I took advantage of the momentary pause in the flow of words to insert, "Your son-in-law says he was talking to you on the phone at the time your daughter was killed."

"Yes. When he phoned me he said you would probably ask about that." She cocked a quizzical eyebrow at me. "Surely you don't suspect him of killing Joan, do you?"

"The spouse is always a routine suspect in a homicide, Mrs. Phelps. I haven't accused Mr. Turnbull of anything. I'll be quite happy to clear him as a suspect if you can confirm his alibi. Do you recall just what time you phoned him and how long you talked?"

"I can tell you to the minute, Sergeant, because I had a casserole in the oven that had to come out at ten of six. I turned on the oven at five-ten, then immediately dialed Ad. That fellow he's staying with answered—Lionel some-

thing. I never liked the man. I think he's been a bad influence on Ad. There is always potential for trouble in a marriage when the husband continues his friendship with a chronic bachelor. The fellow has never been married, you know, which seems to me unnatural for a man past thirty. While Ad and Joan were still together, he was always coming around and luring Ad to go off and do bachelor things with him, such as bowling, shooting pool and playing poker. I think he's the one who introduced Ad to that little tramp who caused the final breakup between Ad and my daughter."

I began to understand how the telephone conversation had lasted so long. When she paused for breath, I quickly slipped in, "When did your phone conversation end?"

She looked surprised. "I thought I already told you. At ten of six. I kept checking my wristwatch because of the casserole, and when it was ten to six, I told Ad I had to hang up. It was just when I was beginning to make some progress, too. He had admitted he was still fond of Joan, and if things were different—if she stopped nagging him about going out with his friend Lionel, for instance—maybe the marriage could

still work. I was really beginning to feel quite encouraged that they would patch things up. But maybe at that very moment the poor girl was being killed by the fiend who murdered her."

That was interesting. Addison Turnbell had said to me, "I was trying to divorce the woman, Sergeant. I wasn't wishing her dead, but frankly I was fed up to the eyebrows with her." Yet a couple of hours earlier he had hinted to his mother-in-law that reconciliation was still possible. Of course, that possibly could have been simply to shut her up.

After a brief pause Mrs. Phelps opened her mouth to say something else, but I beat her to it by asking quickly, "What time does your wristwatch show right now?"

Looking at it, she said, "Eighty-fourty-two. It keeps very good time. I haven't set it for weeks, yet it's always right with the time they announce on television."

She reminded me of the guy who, when you asked him the time, told you how to build a watch.

My watch, which also keeps very good time, showed eighty-fourty-two as well. I got to my feet. "I guess that pretty well clears your son-in-law, Mrs. Phelps. Can you think of any enemies your daughter may have

had who would resort to this?"

"Joan?" she said, obviously shocked by the idea. "Why, everyone absolutely loved her. I'm sure it was just a prowler."

"Perhaps," I conceded, and made my escape before she could get started on another monologue.

I drove back to headquarters, set up a file folder on the case and typed the chronological record of events so far, beginning with the phone call from the Carondelet Precinct. When I read it over, the suspicion I'd had all along crystallized into certainty: Joan Turnbell had not been murdered by a prowler surprised in the midst of burglarizing the house, but had been deliberately murdered. That much was perfectly clear. Nothing else about the case was, though.

When I got home shortly after midnight, Maggie was asleep. When I awakened in the morning, her side of the bed was empty. The bedside clock told me it was eight a.m.

Ordinarily I sleep until at least nine when pulling the night trick, but today I felt the need for Maggie's counsel. Getting up, I yelled for her to put the coffee on, and went into the bathroom to shower and shave.

When I entered the kitchen, dressed, twenty minutes later, she

was pouring my coffee. She gave me my usual good-morning kiss, still with considerable gusto even after twenty-five years of marriage, and asked what I wanted for breakfast.

"Just toast and conversation," I said.

She dropped bread into the toaster, put butter and jam in front of me, then sat across the table from me and cocked an inquiring eyebrow. "Problems?" she asked.

"Just one. I've got a murder that was supposed to look like a prowler job, but wasn't. The guy with the only motive I can unearth has an ironclad alibi."

"Tell me about it, and maybe we can break it," she suggested.

She wasn't being egotistical. Over the years her hard common sense has unraveled a number of snarls that had me baffled.

The toast popped up and I waited until she brought it to me before beginning. Then I described in detail everything that had happened the night before.

"It couldn't have been a prowler surprised in the act," I concluded. "And not just because those two dumped drawers were so obviously staged. There was no way he could have avoided hearing her arrive home in plenty of time to scoot out the front door

before she came in the back. If that noisy garage door hadn't alerted him, he still couldn't have missed hearing her steel heel cleats clicking along that fifty-foot stretch of concrete walk from the garage to the back porch. If the next-door neighbor heard both sounds, why couldn't the killer?"

"He could have been deaf," Maggie suggested.

I made an impatient gesture. "Who ever heard of a deaf burglar? It would be too much of an occupational hazard."

She grinned at me. "Okay, so he had to hear her coming. Which means he deliberately waited there in the kitchen, intending to kill her."

"Uh-huh."

"So what's your problem?"

I paused in the act of spreading jam on toast to stare at her. "My problem is that the only guy with a motive to kill her was four blocks away when she died, talking to her mother on the phone."

"While his apartment-mate was out shopping. Or *says* he was shopping."

I continued to stare at her.

"His friend did it for him," Maggie said. "While he deliberately kept his mother-in-law on the phone in order to give himself an alibi."

Setting down my toast, I folded

my hands in my lap and peered at her until she blushed.

"You don't like it?" she asked.

"Oh, I think it's a remarkable theory," I said with irony. "I'm curious about one small point, though. How did Turnbull induce his friend to commit murder for him?"

"I can't do all your work for you," she informed me. "Maybe he paid him."

"Out of his salary putting together carburetors on an assembly line?"

"Maybe Lionel Short wants somebody killed too," she said with sudden inspiration. "And next time, Addison Turnbull is going to do it while Short makes himself an alibi."

I gave my head a pitying shake. "You're losing your grip, light of my life. If there were collusion between Turnbull and Short to murder the woman, why would Short admit being gone from the apartment at the time of the murder? They could have alibied each other simply by swearing neither was out of the other's sight."

She blushed again, then made a face at me. "Well, nobody's perfect."

"He could have hired a killer, though," I said thoughtfully. "A pro, I mean."

"Out of his salary putting to-

gether carburetors on an assembly line?" she mimicked me.

I picked up my toast again. The phone rang and Maggie got up to answer it. She caught it on the kitchen extension, which was a wall phone above the counter next to the stove. I was facing that way.

After saying hello, she cupped a palm over the mouthpiece, assumed a martyred expression and said in a low voice, "Grace Fenwick."

Grace was one of Maggie's more long-winded friends. I finished my toast to the accompaniment of only occasional monosyllabic comments by Maggie and the steady drone of Grace's high-pitched voice coming from the phone.

I drained my coffee cup and was just getting ready to get up for more when Maggie gestured me to remain seated, picked up the pot from the stove and carried it over to the table to fill my cup.

"How'd you get away from old gabby so fast?" I inquired.

Maggie placed a finger to her lips and tossed her head in the direction of the phone. Looking that way, I saw that she had not hung it up, but had merely laid it down on the counter.

In a low voice Maggie said, "She'll never know I'm gone. She

never stops talking long enough for an answer. But she might hear you when you talk so loud."

She went back to the phone. I gazed at her for a time, then left my second cup of coffee untouched, went into the bedroom and put on my necktie and suit coat.

Maggie was still listening to the telephone when I gave her a kiss on the free ear and whispered into it, "You haven't lost your grip after all, doll. You solved it." I continued on out.

On my way down to Carondelet I did a considerable amount of thinking. I knew I had a solved case, but proving it was going to be a problem.

I had the advantage that Addison Turnbull hadn't seemed very bright. Actually he had been more lucky than clever, because his murder scheme had been pretty harebrained. It had contained so many possible pitfalls that its working could be ascribed to nothing less than improbable luck. His mother-in-law could have asked a question that required an answer; his apartment-mate could have returned before he got back; Emma Crowder could have arrived thirty seconds earlier and have seen him leaving by the back gate.

Anyone stupid enough to devise

such a murder plan might be stupid enough to fall for a bluff, I decided.

It wasn't quite nine a.m. when I rang the apartment bell. Addison Turnbull himself answered the door. He was in pajamas and a robe, but apparently had been up for a time, because his hair was combed and he looked freshly shaved. He greeted me without enthusiasm, but without surprise either, and invited me in.

"Where's your friend?" I inquired as he closed the door behind me.

"Still sleeping. He went out on the town last night after you left us. Have a seat?"

"No, thanks. Mr. Turnbull, you are under arrest for investigation, suspicion of homicide." I took out the little card and read him his constitutional rights.

When I finished, he gazed at me with his mouth open for some time before finally saying in a high voice, "You're arresting me for what?"

"For murdering your wife," I explained. "I think it must have been a spur-of-the-moment thing instead of something you elaborately planned, because the situation that developed was too accidental. All of a sudden you found yourself on the phone with a woman who talked so inter-

minably that she probably wouldn't miss you if you left her talking to herself even for as long as fifteen minutes. Your apartment-mate was off to the store, so he wouldn't know you had left the apartment. And your wife was due home in a very few minutes. I imagine you still have a key to the house. You got there just before your wife did, hurriedly upended a couple of drawers in an attempt to make it look like a burglary, stabbed her as she walked in, wiped off your prints and took off for here again. By walking fast, you probably made the round trip in no more than ten minutes."

"You're crazy," he said huskily, licking his lips. "You'll never prove it."

"Oh, but I have proved it. Not

by your mother-in-law, because she still thinks she was talking to you all the time, instead of to herself. Your wife's neighbor across the alley happened to be trying out a brand-new Polaroid camera from his back porch just as you came out the back door, and he noted the time was exactly five thirty-two p.m. I have the print right here."

As I reached for my breast pocket, he broke for the kitchen, presumably meaning to flee by the back door. I don't know where he thought he was going in pajamas, a robe and slippers, but it became an academic question when he tripped over a kitchen chair and sprawled flat on his stomach.

I put a knee on his back and cuffed his wrists behind him before I helped him to his feet.



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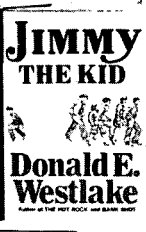
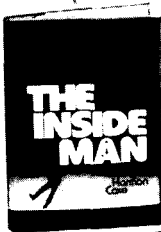
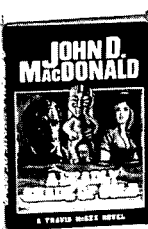
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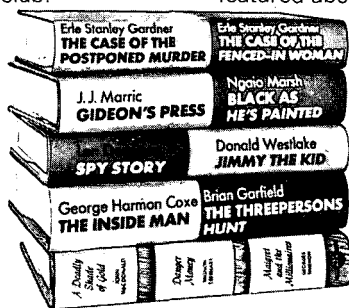
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